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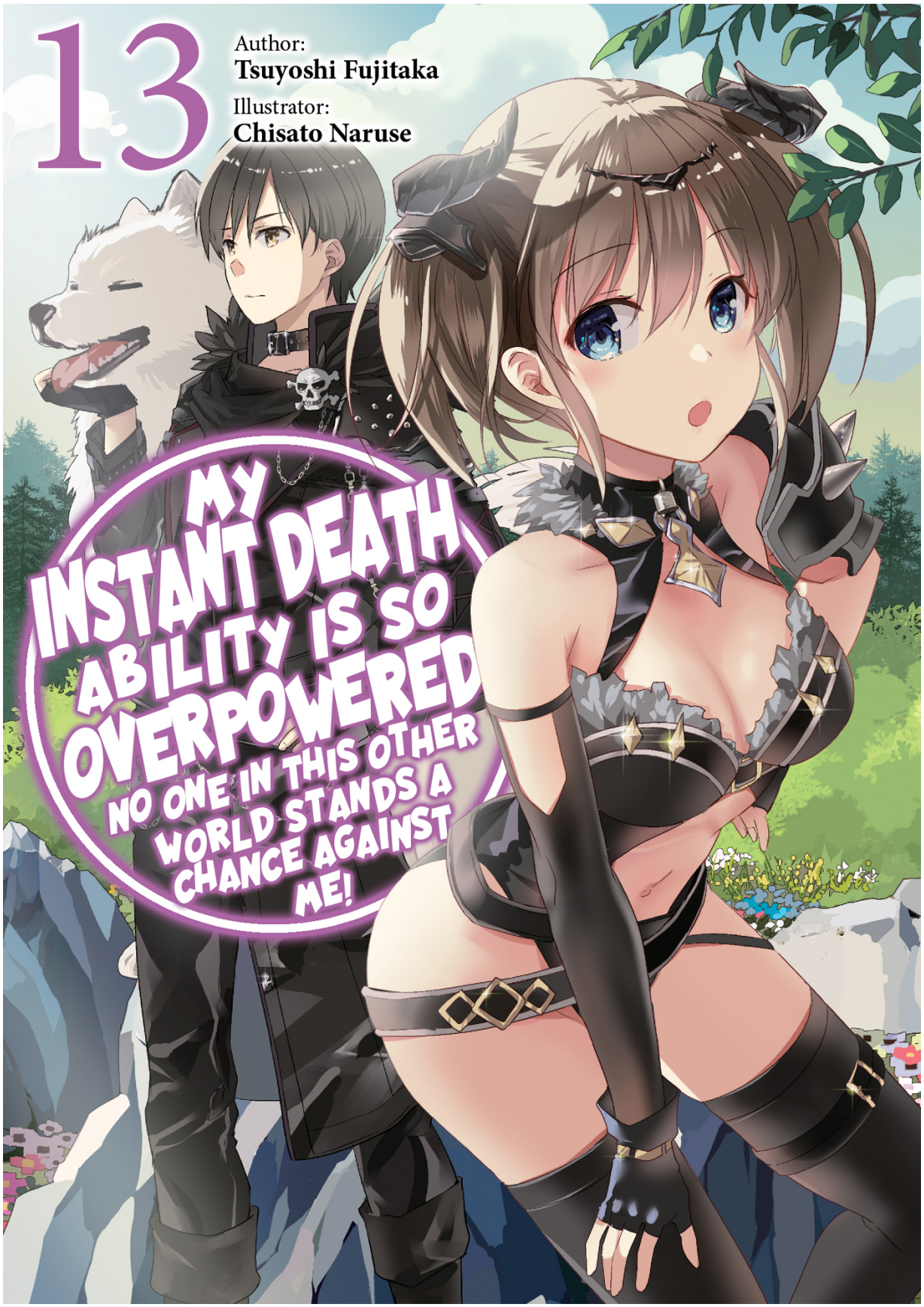
Author:
Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Illustrator:
Chisato Naruse

My Instant Death Ability is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!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CHARACTERS

Tomochika Dannoura

High School Year 2. Although she looks quite attractive and has quite the ample chest, her role is unfortunately that of the Straight Man. Like Yogiri, she did not receive the power of the Gift, but she is trained in a martial art derived from the ancient Dannoura style of archery.

Yogiri Takatou

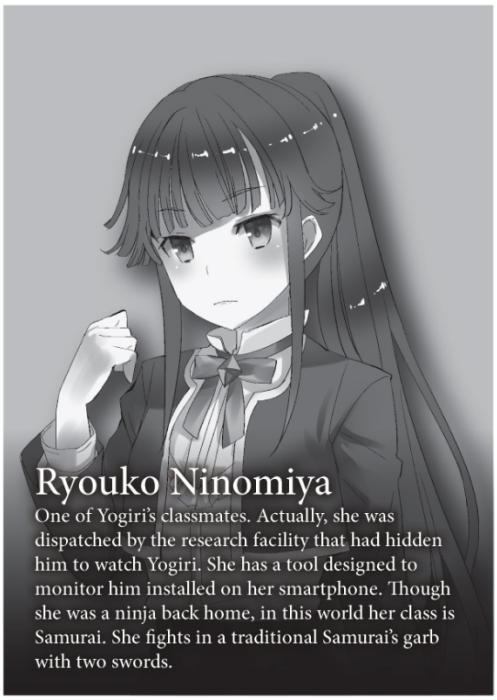
High School Year 2. Although he seemed unmotivated and was always sleeping in school, when he gets serious, he is surprisingly attractive. He didn't receive the Gift, the special power of this world, but he already had the power of Instant Death from his original world. Also known as AΩ.

Asaka Takatou

A female college student who, while struggling to find work, ended up taking an interview at a suspicious institution known as the Independent Higher Life Form Research Facility, and unfortunately ended up finding work there. She normally ties her long hair up behind her head. At her new work place, she met AΩ, whom she named Yogiri.

Mokomoko Dannoura

Tomochika's ancestor and guardian spirit. As a ghost from the Heian era, she was the one responsible for reviving the Dannoura School of Archery...or so she says. She looks exactly like Tomochika's older sister (in that she's fat), and wears a kimono in the fashion of the Heian-era nobility. Apparently, she is well acquainted with digital technology.

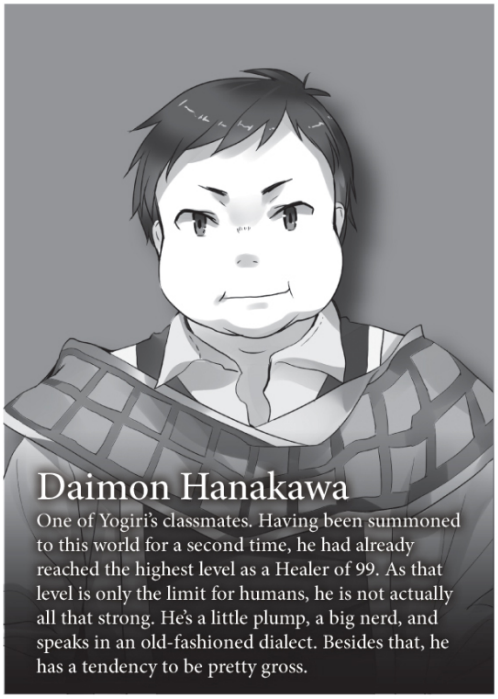


Ryouko Ninomiya

One of Yogiri's classmates. Actually, she was dispatched by the research facility that had hidden him to watch Yogiri. She has a tool designed to monitor him installed on her smartphone. Though she was a ninja back home, in this world her class is Samurai. She fights in a traditional Samurai's garb with two swords.

Atila

The Golden Thunder Dragon. She can take the form of a young human girl and speak human languages. Talks like an old man. Yogiri and the others can ride her in her dragon form. She first brought Yogiri and Tomochika to the Swordmaster's tower, reunited with them after joining Cavern Quest after the reset, and is now working with them.



Daimon Hanakawa

One of Yogiri's classmates. Having been summoned to this world for a second time, he had already reached the highest level as a Healer of 99. As that level is only the limit for humans, he is not actually all that strong. He's a little plump, a big nerd, and speaks in an old-fashioned dialect. Besides that, he has a tendency to be pretty gross.

Carol S. Lane

One of Yogiri's classmates. An American who joined their class as she entered high school. Like Ryouko, she was tasked with monitoring Yogiri, but she works for the Agency. Her class in this world is Ninja, and she wears a red ninja outfit and forehead protector when fighting. Her weapon is a ninja sword.

CHARACTERS

Kouryu

One of the old gods who was defeated and driven out by Malnarilna. As the last survivor of the fallen dragons, he uses the name of his race as his own name. He usually takes the form of a young boy but can also become an Eastern dragon. Taking advantage of Yogiri, he was able to eliminate Malnarilna and gain control of the world again.

Luu

A goddess created when the Philosopher's Stones that Yogiri's group collected fused together. She started as a baby, but after fusing with seven stones took on the appearance of a twelve-year-old. After that, she merged with another version of herself born from other stones fusing together, but apparently, that was all a dream. After the reset, she obtained the form of a twenty-year-old.

The Great Sage Mitsuki

On the surface, Malnarilna is the god of this world, and the Sages rule over it. In reality, Mitsuki is far above them, even capable of resetting the world and making the past seem like it was only a dream. Van's grandfather, though his appearance is that of a stunningly handsome youth.

Sage Van

One of the Sages who "defends" this world. Unlike Sion, he is the Great Sage's grandson by blood. He has the power to create games and enforce their rules in real life, but he only has one running at present. After the reset, he got Yogiri involved in his game, Cavern Quest.

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ACT 1

Chapter 1 — I Definitely Didn't Intend for That to Be Possible

The guildmaster's room was on the second floor of the adventurer's guild. It was Sage Van's personal room, so no one could enter it without his permission. Van typically stayed inside his games while they were running, so this had become his place of residence. One might assume this is where he managed the game while it ran, but once he had set a game in motion, he rarely interfered with it. Ideally, he would set up the rules of the game, and the interactions between players would carry it forward from there.

Instead, he spent his time here thinking up his new game. He loved making games, and his mission in life was to find ways to entertain the Great Sage. At this point, Cavern Quest hadn't elicited a response from him. The game had just been revealed recently, so it would take some time for his elder to give it an evaluation. Though Van had confidence in all of the games he made, none of them had managed to please his grandfather. There was a good chance this game would fail like all the others, so Van felt he had no choice but to start working on another one.

"Hmm. I thought Cavern Quest was pretty simple, but maybe I should try to go even simpler. Maybe something like a fighting game. Two are trapped inside, and the survivor gets to leave..." Sitting at his desk in his extravagant room, Van was scribbling ideas on a piece of paper. "But then the strongest person wins every time. That's not super interesting."

"Do you have a minute?"

Van raised his head at the sudden voice. A young man with a long coat and glasses stood in front of him. The Sage Shirou. He was the submaster of Cavern Quest, one of the few people with permission to enter this room.

"Yo. What's up?"

"Judging by that reaction, you don't realize what's happened, do you?" Shirou said with a sigh.

He was right; Van didn't know anything that was happening at the

moment. But the season had only just started, so from his previous experience, things wouldn't pick up for some time yet. If they weren't going to do anything impressive, it was best to leave the players to their own devices for now. Or so he had thought, but Shirou's exasperation seemed to indicate otherwise.

"Did something happen?"

"The most important items for the current season are the Philosopher's Stones, right? And you set seven of them up as items within the game?"

"Yeah, that's what I did."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Shirou asked.

"Huh? Are you worried about those? Uhh...yeah, I definitely put one stone each in six people and a dog," Van said, looking up at the ceiling as he recalled the information. He himself possessed a Philosopher's Stone and was managing the six spares that were left over. He clearly remembered picking seven random characters in the game and embedding the stones in them.

"Yeah. Aoi was with me when I did it, so you can ask her if you want to be sure." The Sage Aoi had wanted to give Yogiri Takatou all of the Philosopher's Stones so that he would leave this world. She had demanded that Van hand his stones over. Van himself didn't care much about the stones, but he felt like handing them over for free would be too boring. He promised to make them items in a game for Yogiri to obtain, but Aoi wouldn't trust him to actually do it unless she could see it with her own eyes.

"There are fewer now."

"Huh?"

"There are now only six items labeled Philosopher's Stones in the game."

"No way..." The Philosopher's Stones were made to be indestructible by the game system, and removing them from the game should have been impossible. Not quite believing what Shirou had said, Van checked on the current locations of the stones. Four remained in the bodies of their hosts. Two had been removed from their hosts. That made six total. There were supposed to be seven stones, but Van couldn't find any trace of the seventh. "Shirou, you didn't take any of them out of the game, did you?"

There were only a few ways an item could be taken out of the game

space. Van or Shirou could take items out as game masters, and anyone who cleared the game could take their items with them when they left as part of their reward.

"Obviously not. There would be no reason for me to do that. How about you?"

"I didn't do it either," Van said. "Well, this is bad. Looks like the last boss isn't clearable anymore."

"Exactly. You can't even reach the last boss's area without seven stones."

Van paused for a moment. "Hey, could I borrow your Philosopher's Stone?"

"I don't mind, really, but wouldn't it be easier to just change the settings of the game?" Shirou replied.

"That would be lame!" Van shouted, breaking his usual nonchalant air. He could, of course, change the rules of the game partway through, but doing so was unfair to the players and would shake the foundation of the game itself. A game whose rules constantly changed would be a piece of garbage. Van's pride as a game developer wouldn't stand for that.

"I feel like sneaking another stone into the game to hide the error is equally lame," Shirou countered.

"As long as there are seven stones in the end, the flags will still trigger. That's better than changing the flags themselves, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure it's wise to just deal with the symptoms of the problem without investigating the underlying cause. The disappearance of a Philosopher's Stone is unthinkable. Even if I gave you my stone, if another one disappears, you'll have no choice but to change the rules anyway."

"Hmmm. There's no way this should have happened in the first place... Oh! There *are* more stones in the game! Yogiri Takatou got some from Sion!"

Van checked the items in Yogiri's inventory. There were no Philosopher's Stones. There were stones in the dog and elf that were nearby him, but Van already knew about those. He expanded his search to the inventories of Yogiri's party members, but none of them had stones either.

"Did they leave them somewhere?"

"I don't know the details of their situation, but is it possible that they let Sion hold onto the stones?" Shirou suggested.

Van had complete control over the contents of the game. If they were trying to be careful, keeping their other stones out of the game was a reasonable decision. But Van felt like he was forgetting something. He dug through his memories for any important information on the Philosopher's Stones.

"Oh!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"Did you discover something?"

"So, uhh...before everything got reset recently, some of the Philosopher's Stones fused together and turned into a girl. If that happened again, it wouldn't be that weird for one of the stones to disappear..."

"In that case, the idea of using the Philosopher's Stones as items inside the game was doomed from the start, wasn't it?"

"I guess, but I've taken the stones out and lined them up with each other plenty of times before and that never happened."

"The Philosopher's Stones were sealed by Malnarilna, weren't they? Perhaps she did something to them?"

"Now that you mention it, gramps did say something about Malnarilna dying..." The Great Sage had said Malnarilna's death was the trigger for the whole world's collapse. Malnarilna's power as a god was keeping numerous dangerous beings locked away.

"So, what should we do? I don't think we can use Philosopher's Stones as key items in the game anymore." Shirou was exasperated, but Van never would have expected Malnarilna to die again. One of the main reasons the Great Sage reset the world was to bring her back to life. Even imperfect as she was, Malnarilna was the god in charge of this world. With memories from before the reset, there was no way she would fall for the same trick twice.

"I guess we'll change things a bit." They didn't have enough stones anymore, and there was a possibility that the number they had would continue to shrink, so the gimmick had already fallen apart. No matter what changing the rules might do to his pride, maintaining the current rule set wasn't going to work.

"There were six people and one dog who had Philosopher's Stones in them. Let's make those seven trigger the flag for the last boss instead of the stones."

"Some of them are already dead, though," Shirou reminded him.

“Then whoever kills them will get that attribute instead.” All battles that took place in the game were recorded. It was possible to find out who had been killed by who at any point after the fact.

“That makes the game clearable, but what about your promise to give away the Philosopher’s Stones as a reward for clearing it?”

“There’s nothing I can do about that, is there? It’s not my fault the stones are disappearing.” Even if Yogiri and Aoi blamed Van for not keeping up his side of the bargain, there was nothing he could do about it.

“I suppose that resolves the issue of the Philosopher’s Stones. There’s one more issue I’d like to bring up, though.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Van asked.

“Monsters are attacking the human city.”

“How did that happen? There shouldn’t be any way for monsters to even get there.”

“Apparently, there’s a way for human players to bring monsters back to the city with them.”

“Bring monsters with them? No, that shouldn’t be possible... Oh!” Van suddenly shouted, impressed. Monsters couldn’t use the gate to make it into the human city, but anything adventurers wore or carried would be treated as a part of them and therefore transported along with them. It was possible that was how the monsters were making it into the city. He wasn’t sure that was enough for them to be able to mount an invasion, but once the exploit was known, it wasn’t technically impossible. “Well, that’s a problem. I definitely didn’t intend for that to be possible.”

If the purpose of the game was just to have fights between humans and monsters, there wouldn’t be any issue. But Van’s intentions were for the game to be about players systematically improving their equipment and eventually taking down the last boss. It wasn’t just about killing.

“Well, that should be easy enough to fix, so let me—” He just needed to add more checks to the gates. As he thought through the practical solutions to the problem, he noticed a woman standing beside Shirou.

“I don’t remember giving you permission to be in here, Alexia.”

The self-styled secretary of the Great Sage gazed back at him coldly through her glasses. “I have a message from the Great Sage. He finds the current situation interesting and does not wish for you to change it,” she stated matter-of-factly, unfazed by Van’s irritation with her.

Chapter 2 — We Don’t Really Have Any Reason to Go Out of Our Way to Help Them

Yogiri’s group was utterly confused. They had just returned to Base Town to find a hellish scene of monsters ripping people apart. Yogiri had killed the monsters that had tried to attack them, but they had no idea why monsters were there in the first place.

“If the monsters made it here, they must have come through the gate.” Yogiri turned around to look at the large doors they had just come through. The town was in an isolated cavern that they had only managed to reach because Van had teleported them. As far as Yogiri knew, these doors were the only gate that allowed entry or exit.

“I heard there was also a way to change channels,” Tomochika said, reminding Yogiri of the explanation they heard from Van. “There are a bunch of towns similar to this one, and they’re distinguished by their channel number. Maybe the monsters can come here directly from their town?”

“The place I was in was hardly a town. It was little more than a cave,” Atila replied. “It is just a hunch, but I suspect it is impossible for them to come here straight from their own town.”

“Is there a reason for the monsters to attack Base Town in the first place?” Yogiri asked.

“Defeating humans earns them DP,” Atila answered. “The more creative they are in the killing, the more points they earn. It would not be strange for a raid on the city to accrue a large number of bonus points. Even if there were no such bonus, the humans here would never expect an attack and thus be easy prey.”

“Monsters have to pay the Life Tax with DP too, right?”

“Correct. Otherwise there would be no reason for them to proactively

attack humans."

"I am sure we all have many thoughts on the matter, but I do not believe this is the place to be discussing it," Edelgart suggested.

"I guess we should take a look outside," Yogiri agreed. They couldn't accomplish anything by standing around, and the current state of the guild didn't make them want to stay for very long either. With Yogiri in the lead, the rest followed him outside. The dog Dai, Tomochika, the city guard Edelgart, the dragon Atila, and the elf Sakut followed behind him, in that order.

The scenery outside wasn't all that different from what they had witnessed in the guild. Corpses littered the streets. The sheer number of bodies made it clear that the adventurers had already lost the battle.

"Looks like everyone was wiped out," Yogiri said. The town was quiet, with no signs of continued resistance.

At this rate, the city will lose its function and we will be unable to participate in Cavern Quest any longer, Mokomoko remarked. *If you cannot register for quests, you will not be able to head out into the fields.*

"Huh? Wait, does that mean we're stuck here?!" Tomochika exclaimed.

"That would be pretty strange. If that were the case, the monsters would be stuck here too." Though he didn't know what the monsters were after, it seemed unlikely to Yogiri that they would thoughtlessly go berserk.

Hmm... If their objective was to acquire DP, then being unable to return would be an issue for them.

If their only desire was to kill humans, that may not have been the case, but according to Atila, the monsters that had come here from the surface had some measure of intelligence. They didn't know how the power structure among the monsters looked, but it didn't seem likely the monsters would allow themselves to be treated as expendable.

"You need to sign up with the guild to use the gate, right?" Yogiri thought back to how the quest system worked. After finding a quest on the board that you liked, you would take the number printed on it to the reception desk. The door in the middle of the guildhall would then open and teleport you to the field for the quest. "Did the receptionists actually do anything once we gave them the quest number?" he asked Tomochika. He didn't recall seeing them do anything at all.

"Hmm. I seem to remember them writing something down."

“Maybe we can do that ourselves and take other quests. If only guild staff can do it, we’ll be pretty stuck.”

“Though it is a slim hope, perhaps we should search for survivors?” Edelgart asked with a sigh. It didn’t seem she believed they would find any.

“Leave it to me!” cried Atila. “With my supernatural senses as a dragon, I can find any survivors in no time! Hmm...I do notice a weak presence...but it is weak. They may already be on the verge of perishing.”

“We should still check up on them. Where are they?”

“There and there. I suppose in there as well. There are also monsters in there, so the fighting may still be ongoing...” Atila said, pointing at the weapon shop, the inn, and the information shop in turn. Despite her claim, there was no indication that fighting was still in progress. If there were survivors, they may have been in hiding.

“It seems dangerous for us to split up now,” Yogiri said. “Let’s all go to the information shop together. Is that okay with everyone?”

“Why there?” asked Tomochika.

“Perhaps because we can get use out of the weapon and item shops just by taking the equipment left there, but the information shop will be useless if we don’t save the people who run it.” Though she spoke with a bitter expression, Edelgart didn’t seem to have any objections.

“Wait a minute!” Sakut shouted. “Are you planning on letting the others die?!”

“We don’t really have any reason to go out of our way to help them,” Yogiri answered her.

“What? Are you all okay with that?”

“We should of course save those we can, but we still don’t understand the situation very well,” Yogiri continued. “Rescuing those at the information shop will give us a better chance of figuring out what’s going on, so that seems like the best course of action.”

“I am technically on the monster’s side, after all,” Atila added. “Though I have an interest in human society, the lives of individuals in any given city do not mean much to me.”

“Wouldn’t it be normal in a situation like this to try and save everyone?” Based on Tomochika’s expression, she had just remembered that playing the archetypal heroes would result in more DP.

“Couldn’t you kill all the monsters in the city with your power?”

Edelgart asked Yogiri.

"Not unless I notice them myself." That said, even if he could have, he wouldn't have. He didn't think it was acceptable to slaughter beings just because they were monsters. "I thought it would be best to head to the information shop together, but if you don't want to, you don't have to come with me. That's where I'm going, though."

They wouldn't save anyone by arguing here. Leaving everyone else to make their own decisions, Yogiri began heading to the information shop, but he soon came to a stop. The doors of the shop opened and someone stepped outside. It was a boy with horns growing from his forehead, carrying something like a pillar on his shoulders.

"Oh, I'm impressed there are still survivors," he said, impressed. "Wait, have we met before?"

"Oh! You were one of the guys with Hanakawa!" Tomochika shouted, stimulating Yogiri's memory. He had been one of the people they'd met in the guildmaster's room. Van had called in six people, all of whom had Philosopher's Stones in them.

"Hanakawa is the dude who got his chest ripped open, right?" the boy said. "Man, that guy has terrible luck. We had no way to fight back there. I was afraid he was going to do the same thing to all of us." He dropped the pillar to stand it on the ground, the pillar's massive weight causing the earth beneath their feet to shake.

As if that was some sort of signal, monsters suddenly piled out of the buildings around them, twenty or so of them forming up behind the boy. It seemed he was in command of the creatures attacking the town.

"Hey...that is what I was talking about. I can feel there are humans in that thing," Atila said, hesitantly pointing at the pillar.

Yogiri looked at the pillar. It was about twice as long as the boy was tall. And it was made of flesh. It must have been made from numerous people. He could see arms, legs, and faces all crushed together.

"You've got a nasty hobby, don't you?" Yogiri said.

"If we wiped out all the humans, we wouldn't be able to go home," the boy replied. "At least this way, they're still alive, right?"

Yogiri looked more closely at the pillar. Judging from the faint wriggling and weak cries coming from it, it did seem that the people who made it up were still alive. He also noticed that one of the people in it was the

receptionist from the guildhall. If the boy had kept her alive, it was likely they did need guild staff around to open the gate.

"What are you doing here?" Yogiri asked.

"What do you mean? I'm just playing that dumbass Sage's game like he wanted."

"I guess that makes sense." Though Yogiri couldn't help feeling resentment towards the boy, as he said, it wasn't really his own fault. If Yogiri wanted to complain, it would make more sense to talk to Van himself.

"I guess we should get this over with. What're your names?"

"Why do you want to know?" Yogiri asked.

"Come on, you should be able to figure that out. This is a pretty common template, isn't it?"

"Oh, right!" Yogiri recalled the rules surrounding DP. The amount of DP gained increased by doing dramatic things, but any sort of planning in advance would nullify the bonus. "I see. But in that case, if you're going to ask someone their name, you should introduce yourself first."

"Ah. Is that right? Very well. I am one of Gorbagion's Four Heavenly Kings. My name is Naltine the Weakest."

"Wait, you're fine with that name?!" Tomochika blurted out in shock.

"'The Weakest' is your nickname?" Yogiri asked, not sure he had heard correctly.

"Exactly. I am the weakest, as in all the others are stronger than me. Of course, that's just among the Four Heavenly Kings."

"You seem awfully proud of it! You don't mind being called the weakest?!"

"Come on, even I don't take that to be literal. But it's better for my character if I claim to be the weakest than if I claim to be the strongest, right?"

"I...guess?"

"Anyway, regardless of what I think, that's what Lord Gorbagion decided."

The questions are truly endless, are they not? asked Mokomoko. *Who is this Gorbagion? Why is he using a Buddhist term like "Four Heavenly Kings"?*

"That's enough for my introduction. Now, tell me your names."

“This is the dragon, Atila. And this is the city guard, Edelgart.” Introducing the two of them, Yogiri stepped back. As if recognizing what he was doing, Tomochika and Sakut stepped back with him.

“What are you doing?!”

“Hold on...shouldn’t you be the one fighting him?”

Atila and Edelgart complained after being left in front by themselves.

“He has a Philosopher’s Stone inside him. If he dies, the stone loses its power, so could you restrain him so we can take the stone out before he dies?” Yogiri said.

“I suppose there is no other way,” Atila frowned. “Though I cannot say I like it!”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t help?” Tomochika murmured.

“Those two seem pretty strong, so you can leave it to them.” Yogiri was armed as well, but he didn’t feel like he’d stand a chance against a group of monsters that size.

“Couldn’t you at least deal with the monsters in the back?”

“I’d rather resolve the situation without using my power.” If they attacked him and he had no other choice, he would use his power to defend himself, but he didn’t want to use it proactively.

“Fine! I will finish them in no time!” Atila stretched a hand forward, firing lightning.

But even though she had intended to wipe out the entire crowd of monsters, the lightning all collected into a single point, striking a single monster in front of the boy and thoroughly roasting it. Burned to a crisp, the monster dropped to the ground.

“What happened?! Why was there suddenly a monster in front of him?!”

“Speaking of which, doesn’t it seem like there are more monsters around than before?” asked Yogiri. Originally there had been about twenty monsters behind the boy, but at some point they had been surrounded.

“There are more pillars too!” Tomochika cried. Pillars similar to the one at the boy’s side had popped up all around them.

It appears the monsters are arriving through those pillars.

The flesh of a number of the pillars was swelling up, dumping monsters out on the ground around them.

“Well...I guess it’s not the first time we’ve seen something like this,” Tomochika grumbled.

You seem to have become rather jaded.

"Can you blame me after all we've been through?"

I suppose not. But do you not think this situation will be too much for Edelgart and Atila alone?

They were thoroughly outnumbered. Though each individual monster didn't seem all that strong, the numbers alone would easily make up for any gap in strength between them. And judging from Atila's attempt at wiping the monsters out earlier, some among them could draw in their attacks to protect the other monsters. No matter how strong their attack was, it would only be able to kill a single shield monster.

"I thought it would be difficult for such a large number of monsters to make it in through the gate by using adventurers, but this makes sense," Yogiri observed. Naltine was likely the only one who had actually infiltrated the town that way. Once he was inside, he could create as many monsters as he wanted.

Seeing as the receptionist is in that pillar, it appears he has the ability to absorb and preserve people.

"He probably can't make monsters forever, so you'll win eventually if you keep killing them," Yogiri said. "Good luck."

"Do not be ridiculous!" Atila shot back.

It didn't seem like they had much of a chance. But just as Yogiri had accepted the fact he would have to do something about the monsters, they suddenly disappeared.

"Huh?"

"Hm?"

"What?"

"Uhh...?"

Everyone looked around in shock. Even Naltine was taken by surprise, so it was unlikely he had done anything. The monsters had simply vanished, leaving countless pieces of equipment strewn about the ground. At first, they thought it was the equipment used by the monsters, but all of them seemed brand new.

"Sorry, I have some information to tell you about Cavern Quest. May I speak with you for a moment?"

Looking up to see the source of the voice, they saw a young man wearing a long coat and glasses looking down at them from the sky. The

man floated down, landing between Naltine and Yogiri's group.

"Who are you?"

"I am the submaster of this game. Or perhaps you would recognize the name Sage Shirou better?" he replied nonchalantly.

Chapter 3 — You're Making This Sound Like a Manga That's About to Be Canceled!

"What happened to that Van guy?" Yogiri asked.

Van was the one who had created Cavern Quest, so he was responsible for everything that happened here. He may have left some minor matters to the submaster, but Yogiri felt like anything involving the Philosopher's Stones should have been dealt with by Van himself.

"It seems his pride has been hurt a little. I happened to be nearby when he started sulking, so he pushed the annoying work on me," the man named Shirou replied with a bitter smile. It didn't seem like he was particularly excited about this job either. "Now then, would you mind putting your battle on pause for a little?"

"I don't mind."

"Well, I do! What the hell is going on here?!" Naltine roared. "How is it fair for the people running the game to suddenly pop up out of nowhere and attack only one of us?! We've been playing by the rules the whole time! You can't just say us being here was 'inconvenient' for you!"

"It does feel a little unfair, doesn't it?" Yogiri understood his complaints. Even if the monster attack on the city was done through some sort of bug or exploit, it made more sense for the staff to start with a warning rather than instant punishment.

"When did I attack you?" Shirou asked.

"What?! All of my lackeys disappeared the moment you appeared! Wait, wasn't that you?" Naltine was taken aback, confused by Shirou's sincere question.

"Yes, I'm the one who turned them all into equipment."

"Then it *was* your fault!"

"It's possible he just did that to calm the situation down, though," Yogiri

interrupted. “He might turn them back after.” If he turned them back into their original forms later, what Shirou had done wouldn’t really be an attack.

“Oh, I see. Not like that makes it okay, but I’ll forgive you if you hurry up and turn them back!”

“No, they can’t be returned to their original forms,” Shirou explained.

“Then it *was* an attack! Are you trying to mess with me?!”

“But it’s weird that you only attacked Naltine. Does that mean you were punishing him for abusing the bug?” In online games, even if the bug was a mistake on the developer’s part, it was common for players who exploited those bugs for their own gain to be punished by having their accounts closed. If one thought of Cavern Quest as a game like that, it wouldn’t be that strange for the staff to take such a hard-line approach.

“Takatou, I think you should just let it go...” Tomochika said. Yogiri’s group had also brought a monster through the gate. Tomochika must have been trying to avoid calling attention to that.

“Ah, you mean because monsters are in the town? They found a legal way to do it, so there’s no penalty. However, if it becomes an obstacle to the game’s progress in the future, we might have to deal with it.”

“Then what do you want?!” Naltine shouted.

“I just find large groups of monsters to be off-putting.”

Shirou’s words struck everyone silent. It took a moment for them to understand what he was saying.

“You mean like a kind of trypophobia?” Yogiri asked, still confused. Trypophobia was the irrational fear of large groups, especially groups of small holes.

“Similar, but not quite the same,” Shirou replied. “I find large groups of living things to be repulsive. I’m not really worried about small holes.”

“I thought he looked too normal. That’s more what I’d expect from a Sage!” Tomochika exclaimed.

“What? So you turned my lackeys into equipment just because of your feelings?”

“Their levels were pretty low. The weapons they turned into are all basically garbage.”

“You’re dead!” Naltine picked up the pillar at his side and swung it at Shirou. But the pillar went flying in the wrong direction, a single sword

dropping to the ground where Naltine had once stood. This time, Yogiri was able to see what happened. Naltine's body had turned solid, then compressed into the form of a sword before dropping to the ground.

"His level wasn't too bad. He makes a decent weapon. But he doesn't quite meet the threshold of being a rare item. It'll probably do as a somewhat expensive sword at a shop, though," Shirou mused, picking up the blade that had once been Naltine.

"Huh? You're going to sell him?" Tomochika stared at the sword, dumbstruck.

“My role in this game is item and level design. My main responsibility is creating methods of obtaining equipment to match player ranks to keep the game balanced.”

“So the armor I’m wearing is...”

“The armor was Machef Druid. Your gauntlets were Gamerlin Andora.”

“Noooo!” Tomochika hurriedly began stripping off her armor.

“That is an odd response,” Shirou said. “No matter what it used to be, it’s just plain armor now. It’s nothing for you to be concerned about.”

“Of course I’m going to be concerned about it!”

“Hey, that guy had a Philosopher’s Stone in him. Are you sure it was okay to turn him into a sword?” Yogiri asked.

“That’s what you’re worried about?!” Tomochika exclaimed. “Well, okay, that’s important too, but the fact he’s turning people into weapons and selling them is disgusting!”

“Whether they are sold or not, I have no idea how he did it! There is no way to defend against an attack we cannot even perceive!”

Though Tomochika and Atila seemed on guard, Yogiri didn’t feel threatened in the least. While turning someone into a weapon didn’t necessarily count as an attack, Yogiri couldn’t imagine it as anything else. If Shirou tried it on Yogiri himself, the Sage would instantly die. It was the same as anything else.

“No, he had no such thing in him. I wouldn’t turn a Philosopher’s Stone into a weapon like that.” So either it had already been removed or he had never had a stone in the first place. Though it seemed suspicious coming from a Sage, they were the ones who set the rules for this game. If Yogiri started doubting them now, there would be no end to it.

“So, you wanted to talk about something?” He tried to get the conversation back on track. Shirou had apparently come there because he had something he wanted to tell them.

“It’s about the Philosopher’s Stones. Due to unavoidable circumstances, the rules around them will have to be changed. Van decided it wouldn’t be fair to change the rules without informing you.”

“What, he’s not going to hand them over after all?”

“No, that is not an issue. The problem is that the stones have started disappearing.”

“Huh?” Yogiri was taken completely by surprise. He had only come into

this game because he was after the Philosopher's Stones. If he couldn't even get them after all, he had no reason to be there.

"Van prepared seven stones for use in the game, but at present there are only six."

"That changes everything, doesn't it?!" Tomochika snapped.

Yogiri could understand her desire to complain. They had only joined the game to acquire the Philosopher's Stones. If they couldn't get them at the end, there was no point in playing.

"I fully understand your feelings, but the seventh stone has disappeared without our knowledge, so there is nothing we can do about it."

"Well...I suppose we don't necessarily need all seven, right?" Yogiri said. They didn't really know how many stones they needed in total. Returning to their own world would require a huge amount of energy, and they were searching for the Philosopher's Stones to serve as that energy source, but they had never figured out how many it would take to get them home.

"It seems the stones you were carrying have disappeared too," Shirou said.

"What?!" Tomochika checked her item box in a panic. Since she had obtained the Gift, she could store items in a mysterious pocket of space and look at them at a glance. "They're not here. They're gone, Takatou!"

"What's going on?" Yogiri asked, perplexed.

"According to Van, there was a case in the past where the stones fused together into a person. It is possible they have done so again and left."

"You mean Luu?! I guess that's possible, but why would she just leave?!" Tomochika replied.

Luu was a girl who had appeared from the fused Philosopher's Stones. Each stone she fused with caused her to grow, bringing her to the point of a twenty-year-old shortly before the world had been reset. Like a baby bird imprinting on the first thing it saw, she had grown quite attached to Yogiri. If she had transformed into a young girl again, Tomochika couldn't imagine her leaving without saying a word to them.

"At any rate, the decrease of Philosopher's Stones is beyond our control." Shirou bluntly refused to take responsibility. Of course, he was only there as Van's representative. He didn't care one way or the other about the stones and had only come to tell them about the situation. Van

probably hadn't come himself because it felt like he was breaking his promise to them.

"The stones inside people haven't disappeared yet?"

"At present, that seems to be the case. Only the stones that were removed from their hosts have disappeared." In that case, the stones inside Dai and Sakut should have still been there.

"So, what is this change in rules?" Yogiri asked. "The Philosopher's Stones were needed to beat Lasbo, right?"

"I guess this will be a pain if I don't explain it to you. In truth, you do not need to collect all seven stones."

"You're making this sound like a manga that's about to be canceled!" Tomochika said.

"You misunderstand. You need seven stones to reach Lasbo, but they don't all have to be held by the same party."

"Oh, Volf said something like that too, didn't he?" Volf, the man who had come to take the Philosopher's Stones from them, had said something about multiple parties working together in a raid to defeat the last boss. It sounded like a single party didn't have to collect all seven stones for the game to be cleared. However, since Yogiri and Tomochika didn't know how many stones they needed to get back home, they had just decided to collect as many as possible.

"The rule change is regarding the ability to reach the last boss. For those who still have Philosopher's Stones, there is no change. For those whose stones have disappeared, the one who possessed them at the time of their disappearance will become the key to the last boss instead. From now on, anyone who kills one of the keys will become a key themselves."

Dai and Sakut made two. The stone they had taken from Volf had disappeared, meaning Yogiri's group had the third key already.

"So can we just go fight Lasbo now, then?" Yogiri asked.

"You can go if you like, but you will have to wait there until all the keys are gathered."

"What do you mean, 'wait'?"

"I suppose I can explain it further. Lasbo's field is divided into a number of areas. The first area is the entrance. Anyone can come and go through it as they please. The next area is the prison. Originally, one needed the Philosopher's Stones to get out of the prison, but now we've changed that to

need the key instead. Beyond the prison is the antechamber. There is nothing to do there but wait until all seven keys have been gathered."

"I see. So if you want to guarantee a shot at fighting the last boss, the fastest way is to get all seven keys yourself," Yogiri mused.

"Uh, Takatou," Tomochika interrupted. "I don't think we need to worry about Lasbo anymore, do we? If Luu is back, why don't we just get her to send us home?"

"The problem is, we have no idea where she went."

Yogiri began to think about their next steps. There was no use complaining about the rules of the game being changed. There was still nothing they could do but keep collecting the Philosopher's Stones. If there was a chance the stones would disappear when removed from their hosts, they would have to get the hosts to join their party and work with them.

But how would they find them? It might have been best to wait in front of Lasbo's boss room. Every day they spent in Cavern Quest, they had to pay a Life Tax to survive. The price of the Life Tax increased every day, so it wouldn't take long for everyone in the game to be wiped out. The only way to avoid that was to defeat Lasbo and clear the game. That meant those with the keys to fight the boss would likely gather in front of the boss room as soon as possible. If Luu was searching for the stones too, she would likely find them there, and waiting in front of the boss room seemed like a better option than blindly searching around the game.

"Maybe we should just go wait in front of the boss room," Yogiri suggested. "The people with the other stones should show up eventually... What's wrong?"

Tomochika had gone pale. Looking around, he saw that Edelgart and Sakut had similar expressions, and even Atila looked like she was thinking hard about something.

"Can't you hear it, Takatou?!"

"Huh? No, I don't hear anything. What is it?"

"Some guy called the Great Sage is talking!"

"The Great Sage?" He stopped to listen but couldn't hear anything. It seemed he was the only one who couldn't. As he started to wonder what was going on, Edelgart and Sakut suddenly stepped away from him. Their faces were full of hatred, like they wanted nothing more than to kill him but couldn't. Yogiri was taken aback by the extreme bitterness they showed. He

couldn’t say they had been super close, but he thought they were at least friends from the time they had spent together.

“So, what are you all hearing?”

“Well...this guy called the Great Sage is explaining that something is wrong with the world. To summarize, he’s telling us about everyone you’ve killed.”

“Indeed. Even the faces of those you’ve killed are appearing before us,” Atila added. “Those we are familiar with among them appear as close-ups. But even that aside, the sheer number is chilling...”

“Ah, so that’s why.” Yogiri recalled the events in the Elven Forest. The elves kept careful watch to keep humans out, but one day, they had suddenly stopped. The cause had been more than half of the elves suddenly dying, which was likely a result of Yogiri dealing with Izelda. In short, Yogiri had basically wiped out the elves.

“Are you not going to join them, Atila?” Yogiri asked, not sure how she would respond to the revelation.

“I knew long ago that you were the one responsible for killing my underlings. Though the fact you have killed tens of millions of humans is concerning, it means little to a dragon like me.”

“Man, this is bad...” He couldn’t blame people for being angry with him if he had killed people close to them. But he had only ever used his power to protect himself, so he didn’t feel guilty in the least. Apologizing was easy enough, but an apology like that wouldn’t mean much, nor would he expect anyone to forgive him.

“Then if you’ll excuse me, I’ll take my leave.” Content that he had delivered his message, Shirou made to go.

“You’re leaving *now*?!” Tomochika exclaimed.

“This situation has nothing to do with me,” the Sage replied dismissively.

“How do you figure?! This is the Great Sage talking—”

As Tomochika tried to press him, the ground suddenly began to shake. It felt like something had pushed up from below, and, in fact, rock was beginning to punch through the earth. Yogiri was sent flying, landing on his backside. Looking around, it seemed he was the only one who had been knocked down.

“What?! What is it now?!”

“This town is no longer usable, so we’ll be disposing of it. I imagine this is a sign that the erasure is beginning,” Shirou replied like it was obvious. With the guild staff and the people running each of the shops dead, the town couldn’t uphold any of its functions anymore. Yogiri had wondered what they were going to do about it, but he had never expected them to just wipe the town out.

“Why didn’t you tell us that from the beginning?!”

“That’s not my job.”

“What does ‘disposing of it’ mean?!”

“There’s no need to be so concerned about it. Any players in the closed channel will be automatically moved to another one.”

“Oh, really? I guess that’s not so bad...” As Tomochika started to feel relief, the ground shook again. The wooden buildings began to collapse as the ground alternately exploded upwards and cracked open. Giving up on standing, Yogiri remained seated on the ground. Dai trotted over to his side, worried about him.

“This still doesn’t look like a situation where we can relax!”

“What you find worrying differs from person to person, I suppose. Now then, I’ll be taking my leave.” With that, Shirou flew up into the air and disappeared. They were in an underground cavern, but it was possible there was another exit somewhere.

“What are we supposed to do now?!” Tomochika cried. The earthquake was getting worse, the ground splitting to divide Yogiri, Tomochika, and Atila from Edelgart and Sakut.

“Good question,” Yogiri said. If Atila returned to her dragon form, she could fly over and collect Edelgart and Sakut. But Yogiri hesitated to suggest that. It didn’t seem like they would be willing to work with him anymore.

“Jeez, this is impossible...” Tomochika gave up.

Sakut’s beautiful face was twisted with hatred, her gaze filled with bloodlust aimed at Yogiri. He had no idea what he could say to her at this point.

“Ah!” The ground beneath Edelgart and Sakut opened, dropping them into the abyss. Looking down into the crevice, it seemed to open into empty space. The two women were gone, so it was likely they had been moved to another channel.

“Are we really just going to drop down like that?!”

“Hmm. It’s probably all right.” Yogiri got the feeling that it would be okay. He would at least get a vague impression of danger if doing nothing here would get them killed. But from Tomochika’s perspective, she had no basis to feel like they would be safe.

“Are you sure?! Gaaah!”

The ground beneath them collapsed, dropping them into the darkness.

Chapter 4 — This Feels Super Wrong. Isn't There a More Natural Way of Doing It?

Mitsuki had taken the name of Great Sage in part out of a desire for fame and in part as a joke. He could do more or less anything. There were a few things beyond him, but from the perspective of an ordinary human, he was effectively omnipotent. With powers like his, calling him a god wouldn't be much of a stretch, and in fact none of the gods that populated the world he ruled could hope to match him.

However, he hesitated to call himself a god. As an ordinary human who had come into such power, he felt that calling himself a god was arrogant and lacking in beauty. But of course, he couldn't pretend he was an ordinary human. He couldn't see that as anything more than an act of self-contempt. As someone who held power, he knew he needed an appropriate title.

And so he had come up with Great Sage. Although calling himself a sage was a bit pretentious, adding "great" in front of it made it so exaggerated that it had a humorous nuance to it. His family had called themselves Sages, but that was necessary to set them apart from Mitsuki himself. Either way, there weren't that many people who had the ability to complain about the Sages, so it hadn't really been a problem.

Mitsuki himself didn't do much of anything. He loved to laze around, spend time with his women, and gaze out over the world, looking for anything fun and interesting. That tepid way of spending time had become his daily life. He didn't remember when he had started living like that. If he really tried to remember, he could probably figure it out, but he had no interest in doing so.

Some might see a life like his as boring. That wasn't really wrong, but Mitsuki liked it that way. This calm, stagnant lifestyle was exactly what he wished for. In fiction, it was common for immortals to grow tired of eternity

and long for their own deaths, but he didn't understand that way of thinking.

If one asked whether he was good or evil, he would probably say something like, "Evil, I guess?" Though he made no effort to conquer the world or oppress its people, no matter what happened, he would never leave his spot as an observer. Of course, if the whole world was destroyed, things would get rather boring, so in those cases, he would reset things, but in any other case he would only watch. He had no intention of proactively protecting or managing his world. Instead, he had set up circumstances to create interesting situations for him to observe.

While he didn't interact directly with the world, he had the Sages live according to their whims, had set the world up to make it easy for others to fall into, and made no move against the Aggressors that infiltrated it. If he really wanted to, he could wipe out the Aggressors in an instant. He could also block them from entering the world in the first place, or disguise the world so that no one else could find it. Instead, he had taken no measures to defend against them and had left the Sages in charge of fighting them off.

As a strict observer, one might argue that he was more neutral than evil, but since he tilted things towards being more difficult so that they would be more interesting to watch, he felt he was closer to evil. He was originally human and didn't feel like his sensibilities had strayed all that far from when he was mortal, so he was at least self-aware. But if one asked if that gentle guidance of the world to create interesting situations for him to watch had worked, he couldn't really say it had. At first, things were fine, but it didn't take long before they started getting repetitive. He had pretty much seen all of the situations that could naturally occur in the world's current environment. Even so, he had no intention of getting more involved. Watching the world was only one of his pastimes, so he had no desire to step in.

As if understanding his thought process, Van had worked hard to develop a performance that would entertain him. But unfortunately, Van lacked the talent necessary to create an interesting game. They had all turned out to be somewhat lackluster.

That said, his adorable grandson was still trying to entertain him. There was a certain cuteness to his lack of skill. Mitsuki would feel bad if he completely ignored Van's efforts, so he at least took a look at the beginning

of each of his games. And that was why he had turned his attention to the beginning of Cavern Quest.

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Attached to his luxurious mansion was a beautiful garden. Atop the perfectly maintained lawn, gorgeous women sat around a table, enjoying an elegant tea party. A small distance from them, a young man lay on the grass, staring at the sky. That boy was Mitsuki. He possessed a peerless kind of beauty himself.

It was something he had been born with, the only power he'd had from the start. However, that attractiveness had led to him obtaining his powers as the Great Sage. Other transcendent beings wished to preserve his good looks and so made him immortal, leading to him gaining a tremendous amount of power.

The women nearby had been glancing his way for a while, clearly enchanted with him. They couldn't approach unless he called them over, but it was too painful for them to leave his side, so they stayed only a short distance away.

As Mitsuki gazed blankly at the sky, he remembered that Cavern Quest was beginning and projected an image of the game above him. Getting up was more trouble than it was worth, so he lay where he was and watched it in the sky.

The screen above him displayed an open grassland, populated with adventurers fighting an enormous monster floating in the sky above them. Turning in curiosity to see what he was looking at, the expressions of the women nearby began to cloud over. The monster seemed like a collection of viscera, so it wasn't something you could enjoy watching.

The monster attacked by shooting fluids and thrashing with its tentacles. The adventurers were using bows, magic, and harpoons to try and drag the monster down to the ground. A number of parties had formed together into a raid, creating an immense boss battle.

But Mitsuki had seen things like this any number of times. There was no stimulation to be found here, nothing interesting at all.

"Van knows I'm tired of this stuff, though, doesn't he? I doubt this is what he was trying for." Considering Van's previous attempts, Mitsuki didn't hold much hope, but there was a possibility Van was getting better. So keeping his expectations low, he looked at another place, a city where adventurers were gearing up and drinking together. As thrilled as they may have been on the eve of some adventure of their own, Mitsuki had seen scenes like this countless times as well. The fact that they were being forced into role-playing also gave the scene a certain blandness.

"This feels super wrong. Isn't there a more natural way of doing it?"

When Mitsuki had been an ordinary human, he had loved fantasy and adventure stories. He had wanted to create a world where people with magic and other supernatural powers lived, so he had developed the Battlesong framework. But he had stopped at making that framework. Whether it actually developed into a heart-pounding, enthralling adventure story was something he left to chance. Rather than force something to happen, he wanted to see it develop naturally. It was a hard idea to express, so it seemed Van had misinterpreted the reasons Mitsuki had influenced the world the way he did. Mitsuki was the type to care a lot about his family, so he couldn't bring himself to chastise Van after how hard the boy was working to entertain him.

That said, if the result was boring, he had no obligation to watch. Mitsuki decided to take a look at one more place. If there was no sign of improvement there, he would be done. He flipped to a random channel.

"Huh?"

It was a sea of blood. Destroyed bodies, dismembered limbs, and spilled

innards covered the floor. Images of monsters toying with and devouring people filled the screen. The scene was so chaotic that it took him a moment to realize he was seeing the inside of the adventurer's guild.

"This is...not on purpose, right?" At first, he thought this was part of Van's plan, but he quickly changed his mind. Van knew full well that Mitsuki wasn't interested in gratuitous violence, so this scene must have been outside of his plans.

Interest piqued, Mitsuki rewound a little. It seemed this was a plot from the Kingdom of Momurus. Momurus was one of the factions from Van's previous game on the floating continent, a nation made up of monsters. For some reason, it had made it into Cavern Quest. Rewinding further, he saw Van releasing the barrier around the floating continent, causing mysterious creatures to rain down on the world. Van hadn't told him very much, but it seemed the surface world had effectively been destroyed.

"Huh. Did he think I wouldn't notice if he didn't say anything? Well, I guess I didn't until just now." Van's only comment had been that he was closing Four Kingdoms and moving on to another game he had been working on: Cavern Quest. An incident that threatened to wipe out humanity was one that would likely call for the Great Sage's intervention. He wished Van had told him about it, but on closer inspection, he saw that the majority of the human population had gone underground to join Cavern Quest, so it seemed things had been resolved after a fashion.

"But with Cavern Quest's rules, they're still going to get wiped out, aren't they?"

In order to spur the players on to adventure, Cavern Quest charged a Life Tax. Anyone who failed to pay the tax would die. Defeating the last boss would reset the game and return everything to square one, but if things didn't go well, they would all be killed. The season framework the game was built on didn't seem to take that possibility into account.

"Well, if that happens, I can just reset everything again. Alexia, do you have a minute?" Mitsuki called out to a table nearby. A woman wearing glasses and dressed as a secretary immediately stepped over to him and knelt down. "Could you go tell Van this is a little interesting, so I want him to keep this going the way it is?"

The chaos was interesting specifically because it was outside of Van's plans. Cavern Quest itself seemed like it would soon bring about the end of

the world. In that case, he figured he could let things go crazy without having to worry about the consequences.

"Understood," the woman replied.

Mitsuki was fully capable of delivering messages to people without sending a messenger, inserting thoughts directly into their minds, but he didn't like doing it that much. He preferred to send messengers when it came to delivering messages to his family, the Sages.

"Oh, there's no rush, though. No need to hurry." If he didn't say that, she would likely have dropped everything to immediately go carry out his instructions. It wasn't that urgent, so he told her to take her time just in case. Now that he had done so, she would accept his consideration and only go when she had a free moment. "But I guess I'll probably have to reset things again anyway. I've never done it in quick succession before, so that's a bit worrying."

He didn't know what would happen if he reset things while people's memories of the previous reset were still hanging vaguely in the back of their minds. Things would likely get more chaotic, and some might even go insane. It was possible for him to reset things perfectly so that there were no lingering memories if he tried, but then things would just turn out the same as they had the first time around. The Sages would have to intervene directly to prevent the destruction of the world. He wanted to avoid intervening as much as possible, so that method was only a last resort. He would rather leave vague memories of what had happened before so that the people could resolve things on their own.

"Hmm...last time, the problem was caused by Malnarilna's death, and I traced the cause all the way back to this point in time." Mitsuki didn't know all the details of everything that had happened. He called his mysterious power "magic," so the magic he used to parse through information and determine the cause of a given situation only resulted in a guess as to when the events leading to Malnarilna's death had begun. He didn't know what the precise cause had been, nor did he want to know. He didn't want to go back too far in time either, since if he did, people's memories of what had happened before the reset would disappear and they would just repeat themselves.

"But if Van's failure is the cause now, I can go back to the same point in time. If he doesn't screw up, Malnarilna will probably handle things, right?"

He was sure that Van wouldn't repeat the same mistake. Malnarilna had also made a mistake leading to their death before the reset, but as imperfect as they were, they were still a god. If they had another chance, they should be able to figure out how to survive.

As that thought crossed his mind, another question tugged at him. Though it was a bit late to think so, he found it odd that Malnarilna were doing nothing while humanity was on the brink of destruction. Though they may have just been playing around half of the time, in a situation like this, they would at least save their own followers, wouldn't they?

Curious about what they were up to, Mitsuki turned his attention to the twin goddesses and immediately noticed that something was wrong. One of the twins, Rilna, was nowhere to be found. Looking back to the reset, he saw that Rilna had never existed in this world. Assuming something was wrong, he checked the current number of people against how many had existed before the reset and found that a huge number of them were missing. Using his data processing magic, he analyzed those who had disappeared and quickly found his answer. Every one of the missing people had been killed by a boy named Yogiri Takatou before the reset.

Yogiri Takatou was a Sage candidate summoned to this world by Sion, and he possessed the ability to kill anyone just by thinking. Anyone killed by that power wasn't affected by Mitsuki's reset magic, so the world had rewritten itself to fill in the gaps.

With things going so far off track, Mitsuki couldn't just stand back and watch anymore. He considered reviving the dead himself, but that would create contradictions in the new world's history. In the end, the easiest solution would be to reset again, so he simulated a reset to see what would happen. The results were the same. No one Yogiri had killed came back. As long as he existed, no one he had killed could be revived.

"Alexia, can I ask one more thing?"

"How may I be of service?" Alexia's face lit up as Mitsuki called to her again. She was still kneeling at his side, apparently hesitant to leave.

"I'm supposed to be omnipotent in this world, right? But I just found something I can't do. What do you think about that?" Mitsuki gave her a brief explanation of what he had discovered.

"I see," Alexia replied. "First, you understand that omnipotence does not mean everything will go exactly as you plan, correct?"

“Yeah, right. I had a feeling it would be that way.”

For example, it was impossible to create a beautiful woman that perfectly aligned with his tastes. Creating a person was easy enough, but their appearance was something that depended on artistic talent. With no head for design himself, it was something he just couldn’t do. That was why he looked for women who matched his tastes out in the world and brought them here. Since they were all born by chance, they weren’t created by his will.

“For example, assume you deigned to create a stone so heavy that no one could lift it. You yourself would also be unable to lift it, according to your own design. The situation with that boy is similar.”

“Really?”

“You allowed visitors to come into this world without restriction. That means you accepted his power, making it as if you had created it yourself.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Mitsuki said. “I don’t limit anyone’s powers in this world; that would make it boring.”

“In effect, even if you attempt to revive someone, you have already made it a part of the rules that anyone the boy kills cannot be revived, so that rule takes precedence.”

“I see. I didn’t do it consciously, but I guess it’s as if I wrote the rule myself.”

“As such, the solution is simple. If you wish to lift the stone, you must simply erase the rule that no one can lift it. If you want to revive people, you simply must erase the boy that killed them.”

“Hmm. But that would be pretty lame. I can’t just give up because things got inconvenient for me.”

“This world is nothing more than your dream,” Alexia replied. “You can do with it as you please. No one can blame you for any decision you make, as you are the world itself.”

“That’s true, but even if I can do anything, I still have to worry about the aesthetics of it.” Accepting someone as they were and then changing your mind when things got inconvenient for you felt lacking in style to him. He couldn’t bring himself to act like that. “I could easily erase him, but I already said I wouldn’t do things like that.”

Since he could do almost anything, if he was willing to intervene, any problem would be resolved instantly. If that were to happen, there would be

no problems in the world, and it wouldn't be interesting to watch.

"I feel like problems in the human world should be resolved by humans," he said. That still gave him room to perform the resets when he had to. Even if he reset the world when humanity was on the brink of ruin, the people still had to work hard themselves to avoid that destruction the second time around.

"But is that something they can do?" Alexia asked.

"Yeah, I suppose nothing will get solved if I just watch. So maybe I'll give them a little information. If that doesn't work, I'll try something else. I'm kind of looking forward to seeing what will happen!"

The situation had deviated far from the harmonious world Mitsuki had grown used to watching. His inability to tell what was going to happen next thoroughly piqued his interest.

Chapter 5 — It's Like He Is Saying "We Can Just Use the Whatever Balls to Bring You Back to Life, So It's Okay to Die!"

The "ruins field" zone was characterized by numerous abandoned, collapsed buildings, a cracked and broken paved road, and mounds of rubble. The shells of ruined buildings made visibility poor, meaning one had to constantly be on the lookout for ambushes.

Carol and Ryouko slid stealthily between the shadows of the buildings while Hanakawa walked brazenly down the open roads. In effect, he was bait. Enemies often attacked from hiding places among the buildings, so by luring them out with Hanakawa as a target, they could find where those enemies were hiding. To others, it looked like he was walking aimlessly down the street. He gave no impression of being aware of his surroundings, making him quite an enticing target.

The attack began. Arrows and magic struck him from the shadows of the buildings, but he was unharmed. A defensive field of energy around him blocked all of the attacks.

"Geh heh heh... Useless... It is all useless! And this is my protection at its weakest, the defense offered just from the energy naturally exuding from my body! Is that the best you can manage?" Hanakawa taunted his attackers.

Having discovered the source of the attack, Carol and Ryouko were already in motion, easily restraining a mage and archer. The last was a swordsman, staring dumbly at Hanakawa after the wave of energy launched from his sword had failed to make a mark. They weren't monsters, but adventurers who were hunting Philosopher's Stones. News that the Philosopher's Stones were necessary to defeat the last boss had recently become widespread. The locations of each of the stones' holders had become common knowledge among the high-level players.

“Dammit!” Realizing the situation had rapidly turned against him, the swordsman turned to flee.

“Oh? And where are you going? Are you not interested in this Philosopher’s Stone?”

“Wha?”

Hanakawa suddenly appeared in front of the fleeing swordsman. His class of Monk had the ability to store up energy over time, then spend it to temporarily boost his physical abilities. He had empowered his legs to the point where his movement seemed instantaneous, practically teleporting in front of his enemy.

“Tch! If I run away from a scrub like this, there’s no way I can handle Lasbo!” The swordsman leaped forward, striking at Hanakawa, but his blade passed harmlessly through him.

“Wha?!”

“That was no more than an illusion,” Hanakawa chortled. He had used the Monk skill Illusionary Fist, leaving energy behind him as he moved to create a false image of himself. However, his skill level was rather low, so it was just a harmless image. There weren’t many practical applications for it at this point.

“Very annoying, Hanakawa!” As if the sight of Hanakawa lording his skills over his opponent was irritating her, Carol intervened, striking the swordsman from behind and knocking him unconscious.

“He seems to be getting rather full of himself,” Ryouko sighed beside her. “It may be best to dispose of him now while we still can.”

Though Hanakawa had been effectively useless at first, Monk was a high-level class. Once he began gaining levels, his strength grew in leaps and bounds.

“Yeah. We’re the ones who helped him level up, so I guess we’re responsible for putting him down,” Carol agreed.

The three of them were working together to complete quests. At first, Ryouko and Carol had fought without him, so Hanakawa was able to level up without putting in any effort himself, bringing him to his current state. At this point, Carol could still likely defeat him on her own, but if he continued to grow at the same pace, it might not be long before he was untouchable.

“Huh? Should you not be celebrating my growth? Why are you

complaining now that I have become useful?"

"Because you're annoying!" snapped Carol.

"It is honestly difficult to watch you," added her friend.

"Ugh... However! A reversal of my fortunes here is quite possible! Should the two of you ladies find yourselves in a pinch, a gallant rescue from me should serve to greatly increase your favor towards me! Such is a very common development!"

"So if Hanakawa ever ends up saving us, I'll just chalk it up to random chance," Carol said.

"We've saved you plenty of times already, so any rescue of us is just paying back your debt," Ryouko added.

"Anyway, the goal is up ahead, so let's keep going!"

Yo, my name is Mitsuki. You may not recognize the name, so maybe you'd understand better if I said I was the Great Sage, the one who created the Sages.

"Huh? Who is speaking?" Hanakawa looked around. Carol did too, but neither of them could see the source of the voice.

This message is going out to everyone in the world except for one person. I'm going to explain what happened to all of you. It might be hard to believe, but that's okay. This is the truth, so you can definitely trust me.

"This is...similar to the message delivered by Sage Van, isn't it?" Ryouko said, thinking back to the message announcing Cavern Quest to them.

This world was about to be destroyed, so I reset it. You should all still have vague memories of what happened before the reset, right? Some things are different from last time, but many of you probably haven't noticed that yet. Actually, everyone that a certain person killed before the reset has failed to come back, so you probably don't remember them. That's kind of a problem, isn't it? So let me start by reminding you of everyone that's gone. You probably won't recognize most of them, but the number will be pretty surprising, so please take a look.

Images of people started flitting through Carol's mind. One, two, ten, a hundred, and in no time at all the number of images quickly surpassed counting. In the end, all she could see were indistinguishable points, but somehow she knew they were all people.

All of these people were killed by a single person: Yogiri Takatou. Of

course, seeing people like this won't make you understand, so I'll show you the people that you know next.

Then came images of people that Carol somehow recognized. Though she had forgotten them, she had the vague feeling that these people were her classmates. With their images in front of her, the lost memories snapped back clearly.

"It's true that I had forgotten about them...but if he's singling out Takatou..." Ryouko seemed to share Carol's unease. If the Great Sage was telling the truth, this message was going out to everyone in the world. She had a terrible feeling about what he intended to do.

He killed many people who tried to attack him. That's understandable, I guess. But for some reason I can't figure out, he also killed millions of others that did nothing to him.

"I cannot help but admit that killing people just because they may become enemies in the future is going too far..." Hanakawa mumbled.

"Why are you believing him so easily, Hanakawa?"

"He was taking preventative action, wasn't he?" Killing potential enemies before they could strike made perfect sense to Carol.

Many of you suddenly lost friends, family, and loved ones one day for no reason, right? Normally, all the people who died should have come back to life with the reset. I have the power to do that. But it didn't happen. It looks like a rule has been placed on this world that anyone Yogiri Takatou kills cannot come back to life. Breaking that rule myself is kind of difficult, but if Yogiri Takatou doesn't exist, the rule will stop applying as well.

It was impossible to prove whether he was telling the truth, but Carol had no difficulty accepting what the Great Sage was saying. Maybe the Great Sage's power was making his words impossible to doubt.

In short, we just need to get rid of him. Then all of the problems will be solved. When he's gone, I'll reset the world again and turn everything back to normal.

"Huh? Does this not mean that Sir Takatou has become public enemy number one?!"

"Looks that way. I'm not sure why the Great Sage doesn't just deal with him directly, though." It was possible he was on guard against Yogiri's ability, but it was also likely he just didn't want to step onto the stage himself, and was therefore making others do his dirty work.

But there's still one problem. Yogiri Takatou is incredibly strong. He can kill anyone just by thinking it. He can also detect your intent to kill him and kill you in response. Ordinary people can't stand against him. So I've decided to help you out. I will give any power requested to the first ten people to make it to Cavern Quest's final area. So please think of an ability that can beat him.

"Any power..." Hanakawa murmured.

"You're thinking of something stupid, aren't you?" Carol commented.

"How rude! Sir Takatou is entirely invincible, so I only thought of obtaining the power to build a harem and fleeing!"

"Wow...that was even worse than I expected."

Now, Yogiri Takatou is still incredibly strong. Even with the powers I give you, you could still lose. But if all of humanity works against him, you'll be fine. There's probably at least one person out there who can beat him. And as long as someone does, it doesn't matter how many people die trying. Once he's gone, everyone who died will come back to life.

"It's like he is saying, 'We can just use the whatever balls to bring you back to life, so it's okay to die!'" Hanakawa cried.

I'm sure you'll find a way to win if you all work together. That's all for my message.

The sudden broadcast from the Great Sage ended as quickly as it began.

"So what are we to do? We intended to reunite with Sir Takatou, but doing so now may be dangerous..."

"True. Meeting up with him without a plan sounds risky," Ryouko agreed.

"I'm sure he'll kill everyone who attacks him, so things will calm down eventually, right?" Even with the Great Sage granting any power people asked for, Carol couldn't imagine a situation in which Yogiri would lose.

"That would mean almost all of humanity had been wiped out, though... A-Anyway! No matter what path we take, we should begin by completing this quest! We can think carefully about our next move after that!" Hanakawa tried to force the conversation to a close, but before he could urge them onward, a somewhat familiar woman appeared on the road ahead of them. Wearing a white dress and possessing a sublime beauty, there was no way someone could forget her after seeing her once, but for some reason Carol's memories of her were vague.

"Huh? Have we perchance met before?" Hanakawa asked.

"She looks familiar..." Ryouko said with a shiver. The woman had managed to sneak up on them without Carol noticing a thing.

"Hanakawa, can I call in that favor you owe us? You said you'd save us when we were in a pinch, didn't you?"

"Huh? Uh, now that I have become stronger myself I have gained some ability to gauge my opponent's strength, so I can tell I have absolutely no chance of defeating her. But are you sure she is an enemy? Perhaps she is not but a new entry into my harem?"

Despite Hanakawa's protests, Carol couldn't see this woman as anything but a threat. She couldn't shake the feeling that if they made one wrong

move, they'd all be dead.

"You're Hanakawa, right? I know you're one of daddy's friends, so I'll let you choose if you want to rip the stone out of yourself or if you want me to do it."

"Wait, are you perhaps Luu? Were you not much smaller before? Wait, are you saying the stone will be torn out of me regardless?!"

Apparently, the woman standing before them was the adult form of Luu, the child Yogiri had half-heartedly named.

Chapter 6 — I Already Messed Up, So I Figured It's Okay to Just Rip It Out

"No! Please wait a moment! I would like to ask you to explain! Are we not friends, Luu?!" Desperate to at least buy himself some time, Hanakawa tried to appeal to her emotions.

"Friends?" she echoed.

"Ah, you truly are acting as if you have no idea what I mean! You wound me! But no! If you intend to gouge the Philosopher's Stone out of me by force, you must know that my dear friend Sir Takatou would be saddened to hear of it!"

"'Dear friend'?" This time, Ryouko was the one to voice her disbelief.

"Looks like Hanakawa has some problem facing reality," Carol added. "I bet he thinks the two of us are part of his harem or something too."

"Huh? I did believe I was at least following your route properly. Are you saying I was incorrect?"

"Gross..."

"Wait! If you say things like that, Luu will misunderstand the depth of the friendship between me and Sir Takatou! I am telling the truth! In this world full of nothing but danger, the only reason I have been able to survive is thanks to Sir Takatou! That means he has gone out of his way to protect me! So I can say that we are on friendly terms!"

"Don't worry, I won't kill you. As long as you don't die, I don't think daddy will care."

Though he wasn't sure if his appeal to emotion had been a success, at the very least Luu hadn't attacked while they were talking. He had managed to successfully buy some time, but finding a way to use that time effectively was a different matter.

"Guh! I can certainly imagine Sir Takatou saying, 'As long as he's not dead, it's fine.'"

"I'm trying to be kind here. That's why I'm not just ripping the stone out

of you. But I'm not interested in waiting, so if you don't do it yourself, I will."

As Hanakawa thought about running, he realized his legs weren't moving. He was still able to speak just fine. He didn't think he was frozen in fear, so something else must have happened to paralyze his legs. She was telling him to do it himself, so his hands could still move freely, but there was no way he could reach into his chest and rip out a stone that had fused with his heart.

As he hesitated, Luu stepped closer and stuck her fingers into his chest. It didn't hurt at all. There was no blood, even as her hand sank into him. She was passing through him like she was a ghost, leaving even his clothes undamaged.

"Nooo! It doesn't hurt at all! It actually feels a little good, which is terrifying! Carol, Ryouko, please do something! My life is in danger; you cannot just stand there and twiddle your thumbs!"

"Too bad; I can't actually move right now," Carol responded casually.

"Me neither," Ryouko chimed in, just as indifferent. While they may have been unable to move, it was clear they weren't making any effort to fight back or escape either.

"Don't move. I don't want to mess up," Luu chided him.

"Luu, you are a goddess, correct? Is there not a more stylish way you could accomplish this?"

"I don't have all of my powers back yet, so I can't fully manipulate souls that are still inside physical bodies. It would be easy if I just wanted to destroy the stone, but removing it from you while you're still alive is delicate work even for me."

"You asked me to do something myself that a goddess finds incredibly difficult?!"

"I thought you would know your body well enough to... Uh-oh."

"What do you mean, 'uh-oh'?! I saw that look! Do not try and pass this off as a silly, harmless error!"

"Looks like even I can make mistakes sometimes..."

"It is somewhat disconcerting for you to admit to making mistakes while my life is in your hands! So, what? What is going to happen to me?!"

"I already messed up, so I figured it's okay to just rip it out."

"No, no, no! I have no idea what went wrong, and frankly, I am not sure

I want to! I believe in you, Luu! You can definitely fix it!”

“I’ll try...”

“Yes! Please try your best!”

To some degree, she must have been making considerations for Hanakawa’s body. The best Hanakawa could do was trust her.

“Ugh...the sensation of something moving inside my body is terrifyingly pleasant... I feel like something new is awakening within me...” Eyes squeezed shut, Hanakawa could do nothing but agonize over the feeling in his chest, but Luu suddenly stopped. Thinking she had made another mistake, Hanakawa opened his eyes.

Blood was gushing out. Not from Hanakawa’s chest, but from Luu’s smashed arm.

“Excuse me?” Hanakawa said dumbly. Another person was now standing at Luu’s side. A woman wearing glasses had crushed her arm in her hand, ripping it off.

“You!” Luu leaped backwards. Her dismembered arm was still stuck in Hanakawa’s chest, hanging out like it had grown there.

“Huh? What? What am I supposed to do now?!”

“Long time no see. I suppose you go by Luu now,” the woman greeted her. “And that other girl calls herself the UEG. So allow me to set aside my old name as well. Please call me Alexia.”

“You... You!” Luu was clearly furious. Even Hanakawa could tell it was about something far more than having her arm crushed. He could easily imagine that there was a deep history between them.

“Ah, there is no need for that. I am sure you are well aware that you stand no chance against me as you are. If I intended to kill you, I would have done so long ago, so please hear me out for now. Or do you plan to commit suicide by attacking me?”

Though it seemed like she might leap forward and attack at any moment, Luu was managing to keep herself under control. Hanakawa couldn’t tell which of the two was stronger, but he had the impression that Alexia was telling the truth when she said Luu had no chance against her.

“First of all, please stop collecting the Philosopher’s Stones for now,” Alexia said. “We do not wish for you to obstruct the progress of Cavern Quest any further. There is nothing that can be done about the stones you have already collected, but please refrain from taking any more. That is

why I stopped you just now."

"Uh, excuse me, I have no issues with you stopping her from taking the stone from me, but the image of a dismembered arm sprouting from my chest is a bit too avant-garde for my tastes, so..."

"I don't need it anymore. It's all yours," Luu said, already back to normal. She had regenerated her lost arm instantly.

"No, no, no! I am saying I *don't* want it!"

"I am sure just being told to stop is not satisfying to you. But if you still attempt to attack me even knowing you do not stand a chance, I will need to erase you entirely. I only ask you to refrain from collecting the stones until their role in the game has come to an end. Of course, even if you recover all of them, I am not sure you'd be able to stand against me."

"What do you mean, 'their role'?" Luu asked.

"Please look into the game yourself to discover that. I believe it is acceptable for you to participate in the game yourself, though if you choose to do so, you will have to obey the rules."

"Why didn't you just kill me?" Luu asked again, echoing the question in Hanakawa's mind. Alexia certainly seemed the stronger of the two, and if all she cared about was the game continuing unobstructed, it would have been fastest to get rid of Luu altogether.

"I believed it was also acceptable to kill you. You and the UEG both lost, so erasing you completely seemed appropriate. But Lord Mitsuki is kinder than I am."

"Kind? If he's so kind, why did he seal me away?!"

"He was kind in that he did not take your life. Then again, if he had, you would have just revived somewhere else, so if he wished to never see you again, sealing you away was perhaps the best option. If you interfere with the current game, however, I will not mind killing you, so if you wish to die, please do exactly that."

With those words, Alexia vanished. A few moments later, so did Luu. It seemed she had given up on taking Hanakawa's Philosopher's Stone.

"Things seem to have taken an odd turn..." Hanakawa looked around to make sure that no one else was going to pop up. Everyone appearing around them had been so sudden that no amount of caution would have seen them coming. It wasn't easy for him to let his guard down now. After a short time of nothing happening, Hanakawa felt a small amount of relief.

“Wow, I heard you were really tenacious, Hanakawa, but I didn’t know your luck was that bad.”

Carol seemed impressed, but Hanakawa was in no mood to celebrate. His survival so far had been no more than chance. There was no telling when one of these absurd events would lead to his death.

“So, should we try and pull that arm out of you?” she continued. “Or do you just want to cut it off?”

“If the hand had been the part sticking out I could have at least tried out a new triple-wielding style,” he grumbled. “Simply pulling it out seems foolish, though.”

“I’m not sure leaving it in there is a good idea either.”

“Is it safe to touch it?” He knew he couldn’t just leave the arm sticking out of him, so Hanakawa reached up to try and touch it. “Oh?” He had felt something was wrong, but now that he looked, it seemed like the arm was shrinking.

“Uhh...looks like it’s sinking deeper into you?” Carol pointed out. She was exactly right. The arm was slowly sinking deeper into Hanakawa’s chest.

“Huh? What is happening?!”

“So, uhh...if you die, we can just throw you behind one of those walls, right?”

“Hey! Would you not at least make a grave for me?!”

“Digging a hole deep enough to bury someone is actually quite a bit of work. I don’t think we owe you that much.”

“Leaving him in the middle of the road would get in the way of others,” Ryouko interjected, “but I think dragging him to the side of the road is sufficient.”

“You really are intent on treating me like garbage, aren’t you?!”

As they argued, Luu’s arm fully vanished into his chest.

“That’s good, right? At least it looks better,” Carol commented.

“Am I really going to be okay?! I suppose there is no pain at the moment, but...”

“The Philosopher’s Stones are originally parts of Luu, so it’s possible once her arm was disconnected from her body, it fused into the stone inside you...”

“So...am I okay, then?”

“You keep asking that, but how are we supposed to know?”

“I suppose you are right. Very well; shall we continue our quest?” he suggested.

“Yeah, about that. Don’t you think we should start heading to that final area?” Carol asked.

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“Luu is made up of Philosopher’s Stones fused together, right? She seemed pretty grown up, so it looks like she’s gotten quite a few of them back. At this point, there might not be many Philosopher’s Stones left besides the one inside you. If that happened, I can’t imagine Takatou would spend much longer here.”

“I see. So you intend to clear the game and escape?”

Once the last boss of Cavern Quest was defeated, the game would reset and begin a new season. However, the players who had defeated the boss would be granted a wish by the Sage running the game, making it possible to leave if they won. At least, that’s what they had heard, but there was no way to tell whether the players who had left the game had escaped or just been killed.

“Why don’t we cancel this quest and head straight for Lasbo?” Carol suggested.

“Already?! Should we not take some time to make preparations?”

“Sure, but we don’t have time to play around with quests like this one.”

“The Great Sage said the first ten to get there would receive the bonus, so it would be best for us to hurry,” Ryouko agreed.

It was hard to believe that *everyone* would head to the final area, but they could expect a large number of people to show up. Hanakawa didn’t know how big Lasbo’s field was, but if they intended to meet up with Yogiri, it would be better to get there before it got too crowded.

Chapter 7 — I Was Planning on Doing Something about That Eventually—With These Glasses!

“Dammit! What the hell is that guy’s problem?! How can he just turn people into weapons like that? That’s totally cheating!”

The horned boy, Naltine, jumped awake on his stone bed. Technically, he was one of the Four Heavenly Kings. With no guarantee he could ever return, he hadn’t been willing to send his real body for the invasion. Instead he had sent a clone, which naturally hadn’t had the Philosopher’s Stone in it.

“That pisses me off! I’m gonna murder that guy!” With no idea what had happened, if Naltine the Weakest had headed out to seek revenge immediately, he would just be struck down. As furious as he was, he could at least understand that. If he wanted to be sure he succeeded in killing the Sage, he needed research; he needed a proper plan.

“So, what happened?” While controlling his clone, his true body was asleep. All of his senses had been connected with the clone to allow him to control it from a distance, but having the connection severed so abruptly caused those senses to go crazy. He had lost understanding of when and where he was as a result.

Naltine looked around. It was a stone room, barely furnished. He immediately remembered that this was his room. The chair, desk, and bed were all made of stone, created along with the entire castle by Stone Creation magic. Though the appearance and interior looked exactly like a castle, everything in it was made of stone. Of course, that was only the base of the castle. If one didn’t like the stone furniture, they could bring ordinary furniture in without issue. However, the town occupied by monsters was just a natural cave. Getting ordinary furniture wasn’t especially easy, so Naltine had made do with the stone furniture provided to him. There was

nothing in the room he could use to tell time, but he hadn't spent all that much time controlling the clone. He couldn't have been asleep here for very long.

Standing from his bed, Naltine left the room. The plan to invade had been devised by all of Gorbagion's Four Heavenly Kings and carried out with Gorbagion's blessing. He had almost certainly been watching to see how it turned out, but Naltine felt it would be best to report anyway. Walking through the windowless, gloomy hallways of the castle, he quickly made it to the war room. This chamber was similarly bare, having little more than a large round table in the center. Numerous images were displayed on the walls, including one showing Naltine's fate in the human city. Four were seated at the table, with one seat left open. Naltine took the open seat.

"He turned you into a sword and is gonna sell you at some shop. You really are super weak, huh?" The speaker was Breia the Solid. He was an enormous, vulgar man with skin like stone. When Gorbagion had chosen him to be a member of the Four Heavenly Kings, he had said, "You're a power type, right? We definitely need one of those."

"So what? You think you could've beaten him?!" Naltine bit back. "Doesn't matter how tough you are if he turns you into a weapon, does it?!"

"It appears his ability is only effective within his field of vision. Is it a type of evil eye? There should be any number of ways to counter it," said Graze the Enlightened. He had three eyes, so his glasses had three lenses as well. Gorbagion had selected him, saying, "You're going to be the ingenious one. Make sure you wear glasses from now on." He wasn't actually all that smart, though. Naltine was convinced Gorbagion had just picked the smartest-*looking* guy he could find. Their army was made up of reckless, foolhardy types who considered themselves invincible. "Ingenious" wasn't really a word that could be applied to any of them.

"Doesn't your character overlap with that Shirou guy's?" Naltine asked. "Since you both have glasses."

"Hah. My glasses are three times the glasses of any human's. On top of that, I have hundreds of sets of glasses, and they all transform."

"What difference does that make?"

"That dog...is...so cute..." said Haruka the Hollow Claw. Her long hair covered most of her face—and most of her body, for that matter. Gorbagion

had chosen her, saying, “We should at least have one woman, right? And we still need someone to be the sinister, spiteful one, so you can do that too.”

Naltine had been chosen because Gorbagion wanted a kid, and having someone who only looked like a child wasn’t good enough.

“Yo, good job out there! Did it hurt when he turned you into a sword?” The guy casually calling out to him was a young man with black hair, wearing jeans and a T-shirt. The head of the Four Heavenly Kings, Gorbagion himself. Declaring himself to be the Demon Lord, he had made this place into a Demon Lord’s castle. Everyone in his army was a monster, but Gorbagion himself looked like an ordinary human boy.

“I didn’t really feel anything. The moment I turned into a sword, my connection was broken, so I have no idea what it would feel like if it happened to my real body.”

“Anyway, Operation Kill a Bunch of Humans to Declare We Exist and Make Them Hate Us had a few problems, didn’t it?” Gorbagion said.

“What do you mean?” asked Graze.

“Well, if you kill all the humans there, no one will know it was us who did it.”

“Ah, precisely.” Graze nodded deeply.

“What do you mean, ‘precisely’?! You all told me to go kill everyone there!” Naltine shouted. The Demon Lord’s army was primarily driven by momentum. Everything they did was determined by the energy and atmosphere of the moment.

“Also, if you wipe out everyone, you can’t use the gates anymore,” Gorbagion added.

“Right? That’s why I captured the guild staff right away.” Naltine’s pillars could absorb and release living things. Since they had no idea how to use the gates, he’d absorbed the guild staff into his pillar for good measure.

“Keepin’ the guildies alive sounds like a pain in the ass! If I went, I probably never woulda made it back!” Breia laughed like an idiot.

“Attacking cities is hard, isn’t it? Setting up a base in the field maps might be smarter, but I don’t think that’s an option anymore,” Gorbagion sighed. It seemed some other problem had reared its head while Naltine was away. “Apparently, the guy you were trying to fight in that city was named Yogiri Takatou.”

“That loser who sent his friends to fight for him? I didn’t realize he ever said his name. What about him?” Thinking back, there had only been one guy among the people in that fight. But he hadn’t introduced himself, instead stepping back to make the dragon and the city guard fight in his place.

“Didn’t you hear the message from the Great Sage?”

“No?”

This castle was populated by the members of Momurus, one of the factions of Four Kingdoms. Since the Sages didn’t really interact with the floating continent, the players of Four Kingdoms didn’t know much about them.

“I guess it happened while you were still knocked out from the link being cut. Some guy named Mitsuki said he was the Great Sage and sent a message to every human in the world. It also went out to the more intelligent monsters too. It was broadcast to the whole world all at once.”

As they would find out later, even those who had been asleep or unconscious when the message was broadcast could remember it clearly. Naltine was a rare case, being unable to recall the message due to his consciousness being between his clone and main body at the time.

“He says he reset the whole world.”

“I see...” Blind to what was happening, the members of Momurus had been annihilated in an instant by the UEG before the reset. Since they were unaware they had even died, the reset didn’t feel especially real to them.

“No one this Yogiri guy killed before the reset came back to life afterwards. Supposedly, he killed more than sixty million people. Which means everyone in the world hates him now! Wiping out a city or two like we did is barely a fart in the wind! Sixty million people is ridiculous!”

Naltine couldn’t believe what he was being told. He couldn’t imagine anyone believing a message like that coming out of the blue. “Sounds fake to me. You sure he wasn’t lying to you?”

“Yeah, that’s a good point,” Gorbagion conceded. “He didn’t show us any proof, so he could have made it all up. But we all accepted it as true anyway. There was probably some magic in the message that forced us to believe him. I can see it being like a geas that forces us to believe it, but most people in the world don’t think that way. That makes it the truth now, regardless.”

“So nothing we do will get people to focus on us?” Unaffected by the geas, Naltine just couldn’t accept it was true. But if Gorbagion said that was how things were, there was no point objecting. Gorbagion was the Demon Lord, and Naltine was no more than his servant.

“That’s right! He said that if someone kills this Yogiri guy, he’ll bring everyone else back to life. Most humans are obsessed with trying to take him out now!”

“So we’ve decided to change our plan,” Graze added. “We’ve decided our first course of action should be to eliminate Yogiri Takatou.”

“Is he really that big a deal? He didn’t seem all that impressive to me...” Naltine had met him face-to-face, and he hadn’t seemed like anything but a normal human.

“Either way, he can kill ya with a thought. I’d crush him, though!” Breia boasted.

“And how exactly do you plan on beating someone who can kill you with a thought?”

“Hah, there’s no way that crap will work on me. And when it bounces off, I’ll just go *bam!* And he’s toast.” He clearly hadn’t thought this through.

“That isn’t a bad strategy,” Graze said. “Killing him before he has time to think seems like a good idea.”

“So we’re going to focus on trying to kill that guy now?” Naltine asked.

“Yeah,” Gorbagion nodded. “Right now, nothing we do will get us any attention. This Yogiri guy is stopping people from being afraid of us. Once we get rid of him, we can go on to my next plan.”

“I feel like us pretending to be the bad guys in this Cavern Quest game is going to be hard enough on its own...” Though a bit late, Naltine was starting to have doubts. The final objective of Cavern Quest was to defeat Lasbo. No matter how much people hated the Demon Lord and his army, they could never take Lasbo’s place as the final boss.

“I was planning on doing something about that eventually—with these glasses!” Graze said, pushing all three lenses of his glasses up with a finger.

“‘Doing something’? Like what?” Naltine asked.

“Oh, have you already forgotten? I was the one who discovered the bug allowing us to infiltrate the human city. If I can find more holes like that in the game’s security, we can alter the system according to our wishes.”

Naltine wanted to shut him down for pretending to be so smart when he wasn't, but he decided to hold his tongue. Gorbagion himself had given Graze this role. Denying that meant denying the Demon Lord himself.

"Anyway!" Gorbagion said. "Your primary objective is to obliterate Yogiri Takatou! The world might get reset after that, but we'll cross that bridge when we get to it!"

"Got it! Let's go!" replied Breia.

"Leave it to us, Your Majesty," said Graze.

"If we kill Yogiri...can we keep the dog?" asked Haruka.

"Fine. I wanted to deal with that Shirou guy, but okay, I'll take out Yogiri first," Naltine agreed.

That said, finding Yogiri was going to be quite a challenge. Carrying out that order would require careful planning.

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"Ahhhhhh! Huh?"

Screaming as she hurtled into the abyss, Tomochika realized she was suddenly standing on solid ground again. There was no sensation of having struck the ground after falling from a great height, only the sudden realization that her feet were firmly planted.

The place in front of her seemed familiar, a collection of wooden buildings built on dry, barren earth. They were in Cavern Quest's city. Van had told them that there were a number of identical cities differentiated by their channel numbers, and like he said, the placement and shape of the buildings was identical.

"Uhh, Takatou—"

Turning to talk to her companion, Tomochika couldn't help but burst out laughing. They had managed to avoid being split up, but he looked totally different. His clothes were all black. His pants, shirt, and coat were all black, and he had an unreasonable number of belts and chains hanging on him. The skull motif of his other accessories gave his outfit a real punk feel.

"What the heck is that?! Why are you suddenly cosplaying?!"

"That's what I wanted to ask you," Yogiri shot back.

"Huh?" At his words, Tomochika looked down at her own body. Her clothes had changed too. Her outfit had become black and extremely

revealing, and it had clearly been designed to emphasize her figure. She was wearing a headband with fake horns, completing the look of an evil demoness commander. Although she had wanted to strip off her armor earlier after hearing it was made from people, she hadn't been wearing anything weird like this under it.

"It seems our appearance has changed as well." Atila's white clothing had similarly turned black, and Dai was now wearing black armor as well.

“What’s going on? Why do we look like we’re suddenly in some middle school cosplay club?”

“These clothes are gifts from the Great Sage.”

Tomochika turned at the voice coming from behind them. A woman wearing glasses stared coldly at them.

“I am the secretary of the Great Sage. You may call me Alexia.”

“Why are so many people appearing out of thin air today?!”

“You’re from the Great Sage, huh?” Yogiri said. “You guys have really made things difficult for us.”

“The Great Sage has done nothing but share the truth. I suspect everyone in the world feels similarly upset by your actions.”

“So, what’s this about?”

“From this point onward, everyone in the world will be aiming to take your life,” Alexia explained. “You are an enemy of the people, the great evil standing out from among all lesser evils. As such, the Great Sage has deemed these clothes appropriate for your role.”

“Does he have any style at all?!” Tomochika complained.

For a moment, Alexia’s eyes flashed with pure hatred. Though she had a calm and casual demeanor, she made no effort to hide her anger. “Well...fine, I guess. I am only here to deliver the Great Sage’s message.” It seemed she had reined in her feelings. Tomochika decided it would be best to watch what she said from now on.

“What happened to the equipment we were wearing before?”

“That has all been refunded as DP,” Alexia said curtly.

“That doesn’t sound fair!”

“But the Great Sage is our enemy now,” Atila spoke up. “How can we trust clothing he has given us? There is no telling what traps he has worked into them.”

“There is no need to worry about that. The Great Sage is effectively omnipotent in this world. If he wished to harm you, he would have no need to use such tricks.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t want to walk around wearing this!” Though Tomochika was trying to keep her comments to herself, she couldn’t help but let that slip out.

“Is that so? I would think these clothes should be invaluable to you,” Alexia replied.

“How so?!”

“As a gift from the Great Sage, they were made with ordinary materials and through ordinary processes.”

“Uh, so what?”

“You said you disliked the equipment given to you by Shirou, did you not? All equipment in Cavern Quest is made from people. The clothes you are now wearing are the only exception. Do you not think that makes it a wonderful gift?”

“Are you serious?! These are the only normal clothes in this place?!”

“Yes, the only ones. Your gear is now the only exception.”

They technically still had the clothes they had brought in from the surface when they’d first joined Cavern Quest, but those were ordinary clothes. They didn’t provide any defensive bonuses.

“But, uhh...this is so revealing, I can’t imagine it has much defense...” Tomochika mumbled.

“It was made through the Cavern Quest system, so its abilities are not related to its appearance. To put it in terms of a video game, you can consider them to be items of SSR quality.”

“Seriously?!”

“They are a present from the Great Sage. He would never give you something you couldn’t use.”

“The design makes them pretty hard to use!”

“It appears speaking any further with you will only infuriate me,” Alexia said coolly. “Please allow me to take my leave.” She promptly vanished.

“Did she really come here just to give us this equipment?” Yogiri sighed. She had called herself the Great Sage’s secretary, but she hadn’t given them any useful information. She had basically just said, “You’re the bad guys now, so you have to look evil.”

“It appears so, but to be able to change the very clothes we are wearing speaks of great power,” Atila commented. “We cannot let our guard down against such an opponent.”

“Really? I actually have to wear this?” Tomochika complained.

“I kind of like it,” Yogiri offered.

“Yeah, that’s not the problem...” It was certainly better than being rejected, and being told he liked it wasn’t a bad feeling either. But even so, Tomochika just wasn’t happy with her new outfit.

Chapter 8 — Interlude: It Went So Well, It's Starting to Go Bad

It had all been a dream. Her village had been destroyed; she had been kidnapped and enslaved. But it had all been a nightmare. None of it was real.

Euphemia awoke in her village with her family, and she was relieved to see that everyone was safe. But there were some things that seemed inconsistent. Something was wrong. The world she woke up in didn't feel real. A sense of unease dominated the back of her mind, like the world had slid off its tracks.

She lived in a village hidden from ordinary people, a village of vampires. Even that clear and obvious fact gave her pause. Euphemia was an Origin Blood, the ruler of the vampires. Her daughter, Risley, was her successor. But those facts about her family and herself seemed somehow wrong to her.

While she was wrestling with that confusion, bizarre creatures began raining down from the sky. Luckily, there was a barrier around the village to prevent anyone but members of their own tribe from entering, so the creatures were kept out. But according to a man calling himself Sage Van, this event had taken place across the whole world.

Given the situation, she didn't have time to entertain her delusions. She had no choice but to accept the truth before her and write off everything else as a result of that strange dream. Though they were safe within their barrier, being unable to safely leave made those inside uneasy.

One day, another message came to them. While she was eating lunch at home with her parents, her sister Theodisia, and her daughter Risley, they received a message from the Great Sage. The message was delivered to all intelligent life in the world, telling them that the world had been reset to some point from the past. He also explained that those killed by Yogiri Takatou had not come back after the reset.

That message triggered a flood of memories in Euphemia. Her people were actually a tribe known as half-demons, despised by the world. Their village had been destroyed by Yuuki Tachibana. Yuuki had taken her away, putting her completely under his control. After Yuuki's death, the Sage and vampire Lain had drunk her blood, turning her into a vampire. After Lain's death, Euphemia became an Origin Blood. She had then traveled the world with Risley, a girl Lain had left behind.

Recalling the details of the world before the reset, she finally realized what was different between her current and past self. With Lain's disappearance, the reset had turned the tribe of half-demons into vampires to maintain consistency. Though the Origin Bloods had been created by the UEG, that goddess had also disappeared, but someone had felt vampires were still needed in the world. Even with the foundations of reality changed, it was as if the world didn't want to give up on the fact that vampires existed. In truth, Euphemia shouldn't have awakened as an Origin Blood for quite some time yet, but it had happened earlier to make everything else fit.

It had even given her a daughter despite the fact she had never been married. In their previous reality, Risley had been a clone created by Lain, but the child no longer had any physical connection whatsoever to Lain.

"This is...an issue." Euphemia's revelation left her bewildered. Before the reset, she had become an Origin Blood by chance. The sudden history of vampires that had been thrust onto her shoulders was more than she could bear.

"Mama... No, Euphemia?" Risley seemed similarly confused. That went for her parents and Theodisia, as well. They were all at a loss.

"It appears I am still something like a mother to you, so I don't mind you referring to me as such...but it does beg the question."

"Yeah. Who's papa?"

"Exactly..." She had no memories of getting married, but that had never bothered her until just now. She had simply accepted that was how things were.

"I also have no memories of your supposed spouse," Theodisia said. "Is it possible Risley was born through parthenogenesis? I imagine such a thing would be possible for an Origin Blood."

Her sister's suggestion was absurd, but Euphemia couldn't rule it out.

“I think overanalyzing it is pointless. It feels like things were clumsily stitched together after the reset.”

Risley had been created by Lain, so it wasn’t out of the question to think an Origin Blood could create her own companions.

“More importantly, we need to think about Sir Takatou,” Theodisia said.

“Yes. I still feel loyalty to Lady Lain, so if I hope to resurrect her, I believe killing him would be the correct choice...”

“You can’t!” Risley cried out in shock, her feelings for Yogiri very much intact. Of course, it was hard to say how real they were. After all, her feelings for him may have been implanted in her by Lain in an attempt to protect her from Yogiri.

“But I also care about Risley. I understand that killing Takatou would be betraying her...” Caught in that contradiction, Euphemia couldn’t give an answer right away.

“Well, I don’t think there is any value in worrying about it. It’s not like we could ever beat Sir Takatou,” Theodisia said bluntly.

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“I see. It went so well that it’s starting to go bad. Is this a trap or something?”

Having killed Malna, Kouryu was in the room called Heavenly Throne. He was thinking about the message from the Great Sage.

The Great Sage had finally noticed Yogiri and was moving against him. He had designated Yogiri as an enemy of the world and was getting a huge number of people to attack him. This was not what Kouryu had been hoping for. Anyone who tried to attack Yogiri would die. Once Yogiri and the Great Sage were gone, Kouryu planned to continue ruling the world. He wanted to avoid people being killed unnecessarily before then.

That said, he had predicted something like this might happen. While Yogiri was here, it was inevitable that people would be killed by him.

“Hmm. It would be better if the Great Sage tried to deal with him directly...”

If the Great Sage tried to kill Yogiri personally, he would be killed in turn. That was the result Kouryu had been hoping for. He figured it would happen eventually, but he didn’t know when. The Great Sage would send

others after Yogiri and watch intently for a time. It wouldn't take long for him to realize that no one stood a chance against the boy. He would see that they were merely repeating the same thing over and over. At that point, the Great Sage would ideally make a move himself.

"I guess I'm stuck watching again for now?"

The Great Sage may have already been aware of Kouryu's schemes. The fact that he hadn't tried to stop him meant he didn't see Kouryu as a threat. Kouryu wanted to keep things that way for as long as possible. If he drew attention at the wrong time, it would all be over.

"Not that there's a whole lot I could do anyway." After defeating Malna, he had reclaimed his place as god of this world. He had already done everything he could do himself. "The best I can do now is try to speed things along, I guess. If a lot of people all challenge Yogiri and fail right away, maybe the Great Sage will realize it's pointless."

In the end, this was just a way for the Great Sage to kill time. Once he got bored, he would try to clean things up immediately. But if Kouryu overplayed his hand, it was possible, in the worst case, that Yogiri would turn against him as well. It seemed that letting things play out on their own was really the best option.

"Oh, right, right. You wanted to finish things yourself..." he muttered to his companion.

The Hedgehog at his side seemed like it wanted to say something. It had come from another world to hunt a god. The machine had been fairly damaged when Kouryu had picked it up, but it seemed it was now raring to go.

"With Malna dead, the seal is gone. The goddess you're after is probably back to her original form now, but she's in Cavern Quest. I could send you there by force, but...I think it would be easier for you to take the proper way in."

The Hedgehog was silent.

"Oh, can you not speak?" Kouryu had never heard the Hedgehog say anything. It looked every bit a machine. Though humanoid in form, its body was covered in blades. It had a face, but nothing like a mouth.

"But you've screamed before, right? Well, either way, let's try and find a proper way for you to get in."

The normal method of entering Cavern Quest was to say "Play Cavern

Quest” out loud. But the actual mechanism of getting a player into the game was Van’s power, which operated through the Battlesong system. In short, if one pummeled the Battlesong interface with raw data, they could make it think someone had spoken.

As a system developed by the Great Sage, Battlesong wasn’t something Kouryu could control. But the system had a number of different interfaces, each with its own protocol, which, if followed, allowed the user to manipulate it to a degree.

Using the official interface, Kouryu sent a message indicating the Hedgehog’s desire to join Cavern Quest. The message was received, and the Hedgehog was admitted into the game.

“Oh, right. I should change your abilities to match the game too. I’ll make it so you can take quests without speaking.”

“That is...no issue. Speech...is possible.”

“Wait, you can talk?!”

“If necessary, vocal communication is possible.”

“It was necessary just now!”

As Kouryu stared at the Hedgehog in surprise, the machine vanished. Taking a look at Cavern Quest, he saw that the Hedgehog had made it there safely.

“In that case, you could have just joined whenever you wanted to...”

Even though it hadn’t been difficult, Kouryu felt like he had been tricked into unnecessary work.

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Chapter 9 — I've Seen This in Games Before; I Guess It's Actually Possible

"Anyone can do this much, right?"

It was only three years after regaining memories of his past life that he was able to talk like that. Three years may have sounded like a long time, but Taylor wasn't that smart at the time. After showing off a small fraction of his power, he was awash in praise. When he asked if they were just going easy on him, that praise became even more enthusiastic.

But as stupid as Taylor may have been, after such a long time, he inevitably came to understand basic common sense and how strong the average person was. He was skilled and powerful, but he also came to understand how weak and useless everyone around him was. Seeing that gap between him and everyone else, he naturally became arrogant. He then began to say things like, "Oh, did I go too far again?" once he made it to around fifty years old.

Looking back, he felt like he was acting idiotic, but he had yet to learn how to look at himself from an objective point of view back then. Never losing, never failing, his ego continued to inflate. However, he eventually came to realize that not everyone praised him. Once he realized what those others thought of him, he couldn't keep acting the same way as before. Around the same time, knowledge of those who had been reborn in this world and given powers by the gods became widespread.

"You didn't do anything to earn those powers."

"You think you're so strong, just flaunting the powers the gods gave you?"

"They're like children, terrorizing the playground."

Though they praised the reincarnated "heroes" and thanked them when they helped, those were their true feelings. Those feelings leaked through in their voices, in the expressions they wore. Maybe they had intended to hide their opinions, but the superior senses of the reborn were able to see

through the disguise. They had likely always felt that way, but Taylor had never tried to see through to those underlying feelings before.

Looking back at his past self, he had no retort. Feeling ashamed, he fled. While he'd hid himself away in the mountain wilderness, the world had ended. The reincarnated ones who didn't have Taylor's restraint grew in their pride. Their fights among themselves destroyed the land, split the seas, ripped apart the skies, and shattered the canopy housing the world's Celestial Foundation.

The canopy separated the world from the infinite space known as the "Sea." With that canopy gone, the rest of the world easily collapsed. The world was frail and couldn't bear the harsh environment of the Sea.

And so Taylor was thrown out into it. Either the other reincarnated people had killed each other off or they had been unable to survive the Sea themselves, as Taylor couldn't find any of them. Everything that made up his world was reduced to dust, and as the only one from it who could survive in the Sea, he found himself floating alone.

The Sea was an almost entirely empty space. Countless worlds lay scattered throughout it, but they weren't so densely packed that you would stumble across one by wandering aimlessly. Unaware of how long he spent floating there, around the time he gave up conscious thought, he came across another world. He felt like it was a miracle, but the Sea had depth to it, meaning anyone inside would naturally sink downward. It also had currents, meaning the chances of him reaching this particular world were relatively high. At the time, he didn't know any of that.

Hey, I'm Van. I'm called a Sage in this world. If you want to come into our world, there are some small conditions. Is that okay?

Van seemed to be one of the people governing this world. Though he was not a god, he had the right to permit or deny entry, so judging by his power alone, he was something akin to one. According to Van, Taylor's incredible strength made him a threat to their world. Van said he would only permit Taylor's entry if he agreed to stay within a confined area.

Taylor accepted his conditions instantly. If he refused, he would be forced to wander the Sea aimlessly yet again, and the restricted area would likely be quite sturdy. Of course, he didn't even consider trying to break out of it. He had no issue playing along and doing as he was told if he was allowed to live in peace.

The restricted area seemed like some sort of game, divided into four warring factions. Compared to the emptiness of the “Sea,” just about anywhere would have looked like paradise. Taylor was sent to join the Kingdom of Momurus. Each of the warring factions had their own unique characteristics, and Momurus was a kingdom made up of monsters. Taylor was confused about why a human like him had been sent to a kingdom of monsters, but the answer to that question was simple. No one who could survive wandering the Sea could be considered human.

Momurus was a simplistic world, where strength ruled over all. The strong were celebrated, and the weak obeyed. The monsters fought among themselves as casually as they greeted each other, establishing a hierarchy of power. Though he had no desire to fight or interact with anyone, Taylor was naturally drawn into the struggle, and his rank began to rise. He began to take a liking to the situation he had found himself in. Monsters were simple. There was no jealousy between them, and they didn’t hold grudges. If their opponent was strong, they accepted that fact. They bowed to their superiors and made no effort to scheme behind their backs. Their devotion to fulfilling their own desires made them do things that looked evil to human eyes, but when they failed, they simply and honestly accepted that it was due to a lack of strength.

As he grew accustomed to the ways of the monsters, he became more honest in his appetites, and before long he was at the top of the hierarchy. In short, he became the Demon Lord.

After that, he decided to follow his heart. First, he renamed himself Demon Lord Gorbagion. It seemed like a fittingly grim name for one of his station. He had never really liked the name his parents had given him after he was reincarnated. He felt it was better to pick a name he liked for himself. He had only come to that realization after reaching Momurus.

Fully intending to enjoy his time as Demon Lord, he picked four Heavenly Kings to serve under him, built a castle, and waited eagerly for heroes to come challenge him. But in the end, the members of the other factions never came for Momurus’s home base. There were too many problems with the core system of Four Kingdoms, making it impossible for other nations to attack the capitals of their opponents.

One day, time suddenly rewound, and without warning, Four Kingdoms came to an end. While the sudden change left them in chaos and confusion,

another message came from Sage Van. This time, it was an invitation to join Cavern Quest.

Thinking it sounded interesting enough, Gorbagion decided to play. The monsters all made their own decision as to whether they would join the new game or not. Forced into the role of playing monsters in the new game, the former members of Momurus decided to live true to their desires once again.

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"Wait, this isn't the time to be worried about our clothes! We need to hide!" Tomochika finally announced as they stood in the middle of the city.

"Why?" Yogiri asked.

"Because everyone knows what you look like now!"

"Oh, I see. I guess we can't just sit around, then." Luckily they hadn't seen any people around the town, but they'd come across someone eventually if they kept standing out in the open.

Yogiri's appearance had been made public, and there were doubtless many who had close friends and family that he had killed. There was a good chance that anyone he met would immediately attack. And although there was no real chance of losing to them, Yogiri didn't want to have to kill everyone he met. Any fight that could be avoided *should* be, he thought.

"I guess we can't go to the inn either. Mokomoko, are there any abandoned houses around here?" Yogiri asked the ghost.

Abandoned houses? If this village was created for use in the game, I am not sure there would be any pointless buildings...

The town was approximately a square, one hundred meters long on each side. It was surrounded by walls, meaning it was likely located in a natural underground cave. The adventurer's guild, weapon shop, and other necessities were situated at the center of the town, with dwellings arrayed around them. There were all kinds of houses, from inns that could house large crowds to small shacks, but there weren't that many buildings altogether, so finding an empty one would be a challenge.

First of all, hiding behind that building seems like a good start, Mokomoko suggested. As Tomochika's guardian spirit, she couldn't stray far from her descendant's side. However, she could manage to look through

a city of this size without a problem.

As she floated off, the rest of them hid in the shadow of a building. Of course, if anyone were to come outside, they would notice them hiding immediately, so it did little more than make them feel better.

After a short time, Mokomoko returned. *There are no abandoned houses, but there are some without people in them at the moment.*

With no time to calmly think over their options, they headed for one of the unoccupied buildings, choosing one at the edge of town, far from the center. There was a two-story wooden building there. It was one of the larger structures in the town.

Yogiri turned the knob on the front door, but it was locked.

"You think you can just walk in like you own the place?!" Atila shook her head in disbelief.

"It's empty, right?"

"No. Something is wrong. It feels as if someone has claimed this building...but more importantly, should you not be a little more apologetic for trying to barge into someone's house?!"

"I'm surprised a dragon would be worried about that," Yogiri said. "It's a lot better than crushing the house underfoot, isn't it?"

"And when have I ever done that?! I have never once attacked a human settlement!"

"Anyway, how do we get in? I can kill the lock, but..." Any object he killed would turn brittle and fragile, making it possible for them to break it and enter. But that would be a nuisance to the owner of the house. Not that breaking into their house wasn't a nuisance already.

"I think I can open this," Tomochika said, pulling two hair pins out from somewhere.

Indeed! The Dannoura Style Unlocking Technique should be able to manage!

"Oh, I've seen this in games before," Yogiri commented. "I guess it's actually possible."

"Only if it's a cylinder lock. If you keep it under tension and can line up the pins...it opens like that." In what felt like only a few moments, the door was open.

"Aren't you a little too good at that?" Yogiri was somewhat taken aback.

"Do you have no conscience?" Atila added. "Even a dragon like me

would not so easily intrude on another's domain."

"I guess it's an ethics thing. I haven't really thought about it since coming to this world." From Yogiri's perspective, they were in an emergency situation. He considered everything they were doing part of an evacuation plan to get back home.

"You really are an enemy of this world, aren't you?" Atila winced. Yogiri himself couldn't really argue that he was having a negative impact here.

"Hey, if you're going to talk about ethics, can we do it inside?" Tomochika interjected. "It'll be pretty bad if we're seen here."

"No, I have no intention of continuing that discussion," Atila muttered as they hurriedly made their way inside. "We need a place to hide, so we have no other choice. But do not damage anything inside!" For some reason, the dragon was being very careful.

"I feel like Atila's taking the role of the group's common sense."

"Why am I, as a dragon, being forced to make you act more humane?"

"But no one lives here, right?" Yogiri said. The entrance connected to a long hallway, dark and stuffy. That wasn't enough to say it was uninhabited, though.

"Cavern Quest resets every season, right? Maybe the buildings are rebuilt every time?" Tomochika wondered aloud.

It is impossible to know, the ghost replied. *Considering there are any number of towns identical to this one, there is no telling what could happen.*

It didn't feel like an abandoned building. There was furniture inside, and it looked like it was ready for someone to move in, but there were no signs of anyone actually living there. Nothing within appeared to have been used.

"No one is living here. Hopefully, no *thing* is living here either. Are we sure this is okay?" Tomochika looked around nervously.

There are no people here, Mokomoko stated.

"Okay, that sounds like you're hiding something now!"

"We're not planning on being here long. Once we've figured out a plan, we'll be moving on." Walking down the hallway, Yogiri opened a door at random, earning a panicked cry from Tomochika.

Inside what appeared to be a living room were densely packed dolls. Some were on shelves, some on desks, some on the floor. Dolls of all sizes filled the room. Someone was sitting on the couch as well—another doll.

However, it was an extremely detailed doll of a woman, life-sized, so in the dark room it wasn't hard to mistake it for a real person.

"Is it safe? They're not going to move, are they?"

"In a fantasy world like this, I suppose we can't rule it out," Yogiri answered.

"We met a girl that could do that before, right?"

Yogiri stepped up to the couch. There was no indication of movement, so it looked like they were just ordinary dolls after all. Moving the lifelike one to the floor, Yogiri sat down as Dai paced around the room, seeming uneasy.

"This really doesn't bother you, huh?" Tomochika asked.

"They're just dolls."

"Are you sure we should be here? We're not getting in more danger by trying to hide, are we?"

"Let's go over our situation real quick."

"You're just going to keep talking, huh? I guess I can't stand around shivering forever..."

Tomochika and Atila sat on the couch opposite Yogiri.

"First, about the Philosopher's Stone..."

They had joined Cavern Quest in search of the Philosopher's Stones. Although they had been collecting them, at some point, the stones they had found here and the ones they'd brought with them had all disappeared, having fused together to form a woman, who had then hidden from them.

"After that Shirou guy told us about it, there was that message from the Great Sage. You didn't hear it, right, Takatou?"

"Right. Why didn't he let me hear it? What a pain."

"Okay, I'll repeat it as best I can for you."

Tomochika shared the message the Great Sage had sent to everyone. According to him, he had reset the world, but everyone Yogiri had killed remained dead. Annoyingly, he had told everyone about Yogiri's powers and said that if Yogiri were to die, everyone else would be brought back to life. Basically, he was ordering everyone in the world to kill Yogiri.

If I may add, the Great Sage's words had an aura of compulsion about them. I imagine the majority who heard him will believe the message wholeheartedly.

"If that's true, they might not even attack," Yogiri said optimistically. If

everyone believed the Great Sage's message, he didn't think anyone who knew about his ability to kill with his thoughts, or his ability to detect killing intent and respond to it automatically, would want to fight him.

"Yeah, about that. He also said that anyone who went to the last boss's area would get any power they wished for so they could fight you."

"Then even if they don't attack right away...they'll eventually come, won't...they?"

"What's wrong?" Tomochika asked, concerned about how Yogiri had started trailing off.

"It's nothing... I'm just getting sleepy..."

"Oh, this again!" she exclaimed as Yogiri flopped down sideways on the couch, suddenly overcome by drowsiness.

Chapter 10 — I Am Always in the Shadows, Protecting My Charge Unseen

“So this is Takatou’s one weakness...or at least that’s what it looks like, but it’s not really a weakness, is it?” Tomochika said, watching Yogiri sleeping peacefully on the couch.

Indeed. If you shake him, he will wake as usual, and even while asleep, he will automatically use his power to defend himself.

According to Yogiri, using his power tired him out. That said, he didn’t have a real limit to it. He could use his power as much as he liked. When exhausted, he had a tendency to sleep for days, but he would wake up normally if you tried to wake him, so it wasn’t much of a problem.

“Well, if he’s that tired, I’d like to let him sleep...but I’m impressed he can in a place like this.” Though Yogiri didn’t seem to mind, this place gave Tomochika the creeps. Despite the light coming in through the windows, the house was dark. It felt unnaturally cold and was creaking all over.

“Hmm...I did say we should avoid entering this place...” Despite being a dragon and thus incredibly strong, Atila seemed equally uneasy.

“There are no ghosts, are there?” Tomochika looked around. The building was creepy enough that ghosts would feel right at home there, but she couldn’t see any. Then again, she didn’t have the talent for seeing ghosts, so they may have just been invisible to her.

I am right here...

Tomochika and Yogiri could see Mokomoko, but that was only because they knew about her. She was very much the exception.

“That’s true... Why am I suddenly afraid of ghosts?” Tomochika had grown so used to having Mokomoko around that she had stopped thinking of her as a ghost, but if other ghosts were like her, it seemed stupid to be afraid of them.

You make a good point, but still, I would prefer that you were more wary of them.

“Anyway, letting him sleep is fine, but we should try to decide what we’re going to do when he wakes up.”

“Do you intend to continue collecting the stones?” Atila didn’t know much about their situation, but she had figured out they were after the Philosopher’s Stones.

“I’m not sure there’s a point.” They had thought that collecting the stones would allow them to revive Luu, who could send them home, but after reviving, Luu had gone off on her own. It was up in the air whether she’d be willing to help them, so collecting the stones might have been pointless.

It appears we will need to consider other methods of returning home.

“You can’t reach that robot anymore, can you?”

She was talking about the robotic Aggressor they had encountered before the reset. It had claimed that if they could find the coordinates of their home world and a sufficient source of energy, it could give them advice on getting home.

It appeared to be fighting the Sages. If we were to ask Sion, she might be able to tell us where it is...but that robot was after the Philosopher’s Stones as well. It may no longer have any intention of cooperating with us.

If Yogiri and Tomochika hadn’t known the true nature of the Philosopher’s Stones, they would have traded them for the Aggressor’s help. But since they knew the stones were parts of the goddess Luu, they couldn’t just hand them over even if they found more.

“Hmmm...Kouryu said he had a way for us to get home too, right? We’ve defeated quite a few Sages, so maybe he’ll help us out now.”

Kouryu was a boy they had met who claimed to have once been the god of this world. He’d said there was a way for them to get home without using the stones, but he hadn’t told them what it was since he had wanted them to defeat the Sages for him.

He also said he had some gripe with the Great Sage. Now that the Great Sage has picked a fight with the young man, it seems Kouryu will be getting his wish, though he may simply ignore any attempts on our part to contact him.

“Either way, we won’t find a way home in Cavern Quest, will we?”

Indeed. We were only here searching for the Philosopher’s Stones in the first place.

“So we can just leave, right?”

I suppose so. Either way, it seems we intend to face Lasbo.

Every day, the cost of the Life Tax increased. Lasbo needed to be defeated so that it could be reset. Eventually, someone would have to challenge him, and to do that, they would need the Philosopher’s Stones. In other words, if their group took the quest to fight the last boss and waited in his area, the stones would eventually come to them. That was one of the plans they had considered.

“Which means, we will also have to consider defeating Lasbo ourselves,” Atila replied.

“Yeah. I don’t know any other way to get out of here.”

Although Atila had started out on the monsters’ side, her objective was no different from theirs. And if they cleared Cavern Quest, Van would grant any wish that was within his power. As far as Tomochika knew, that wish was the only way for them to leave the game.

“If we plan on beating the game, we should probably go soon...” Tomochika looked at Yogiri. He seemed so peaceful, it was hard for her to wake him up.

I do not believe there is any need to rush. Dai possesses one of the stones, after all.

No one could reach the last boss until all of the Philosopher’s Stones, or the people who had previously housed the stones that had since disappeared, were collected. In other words, there was no chance of someone killing the boss before they got there.

“There’s the problem of who gets there first, still, but...I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

The first ten people who reached the final area would gain any power they wished. Those aiming for it were likely thinking of some way to defeat Yogiri. Normally, one would try to figure out how to stop them, but Tomochika felt the same way Mokomoko did. No matter what power they had, she just couldn’t imagine anyone defeating Yogiri.

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Yachika had the latent talent to become a ghost. When most humans died, that was the end of them. There was no way for them to stay in this

world with their consciousness and memories intact.

On top of her rare talent for persisting after death, she also had a talent for manipulating puppets. Normal ghosts couldn't interact with the material world, nor could they do much more than make an area feel creepy. Yachika, though, could use her magic just as well as when she was alive.

Ghosts generally required a tremendous level of hatred or malice to be able to move physical objects, but Yachika could control puppets with her magic. She could easily affect the world of the living. So when she'd died, she had immediately killed the man who had murdered her: her former lover.

He had been incredibly surprised. He had stabbed her in the heart and cut off her head, but she'd just stood back up and attacked him. If anyone could become a vengeful ghost after their death, it would be a rather common story, but in reality it was a fairly rare occurrence.

Very few people were capable of becoming ghosts after they died. In most cases, the soul dissipated on death, leaving nothing behind. There had to be something different, something unique about them in order for a ghost to maintain its mind and memories after dying.

For the most part, ghosts didn't change after their deaths. They couldn't learn new information, and would be locked into whatever feelings they were experiencing when they died. However, Yachika was talented for a ghost. Despite having no physical body, she could think the same way she did in life. Most of her thoughts were consumed by her desire for revenge, though, so she wasn't *exactly* as she'd been while alive. The anger she had felt at the time of her death persisted within her. Killing her murderer and devouring his soul hadn't calmed her down, so she had lost the ability to think rationally.

Her hatred for her former lover extended to all men, to all people, to all living things, but she never realized there was anything strange about that. Her desire to destroy everything was coupled with a calm, calculating nature.

As a ghost, she was weak. She could use her magic to manipulate things shaped like people, but the only appropriate vessel she had was her own headless corpse. If she went on a rampage, she would only kill a few others at best. First, she needed more power. She needed more objects shaped like people.

Yachika fully invested herself in the rather plain work. She began by attacking someone weak, someone she could definitely kill. She absorbed their soul and turned their body into a pawn. Luckily, even though she was inside Cavern Quest, she was an exception to the rules. The Sage who had created the game reset everyone's abilities and took back their items each time the season changed, but she wasn't affected. She maintained her strength from season to season, and the bodies she collected, along with the dolls she made them create, were not taken away from her. As a ghost, it seemed the game didn't recognize her as a player.

In Cavern Quest, players going out for adventures and failing to come home were the norm, so the population of the town had to be supplemented from time to time. This meant that even when the population of the town decreased substantially, she was never discovered.

Yachika's current objective was to kill the Sage in charge of Cavern Quest and take his place. Doing so would require a huge amount of time, but being dead, her sense of time had already grown so vague that she wasn't bothered by it. As the seasons came and went, Yachika continued to grow in strength. She killed, she devoured, she stole, she created. She repeated the cycle tirelessly. When she came to the point of being able to destroy a city on her own, uninvited guests began entering her domain.

At first, she was surprised, but she immediately regained her calm. The current season had barely started, so none of the players should have been strong enough to beat her. And this was Yachika's territory. No matter who came here, she would kill them, consume their souls, and add their bodies to her collection like all the others. The unexpected intrusion was a bit irritating, but in the end it would only help her to grow stronger, so it wasn't that bad.

She would start by having the dolls attack them while they waited in the living room. As she considered that, a sudden intense pressure in her head stopped her.

What was that?

Yachika was a ghost, so she didn't truly have a head in the first place. She shouldn't have had any physical senses at all, and yet she felt an incredible pain, like something was constricting her head. She searched her surroundings. Although her existence was abstract, there was a general area she could be said to inhabit. Right now, that was at the center of a room in

the basement, where she suddenly noticed another person. It was a spirit so dense she had mistaken it for a human. That spirit had Yachika's head in her hand and was squeezing it. The moment she realized that, her existence converged into the form of a body.

"I do not know what you are planning, nor do I have any grudge against you. You may think me cruel for visiting this fate upon you...but your existence is a threat to us. As a guardian spirit, I cannot ignore you."

"What?! What's happening?!" Yachika attempted to throw off the mysterious spirit's grip. Though she struggled violently, she couldn't make the hand gripping her head move so much as an inch.

Yachika decided to unleash all the power she had built up. It frustrated her to have to spend it all in a place like this, but her existence was on the line. Yet, no matter how much power she used, the grip on her head didn't loosen. Instead, it grew tighter, as if the other ghost was trying to crush her.

"Such is the difference in our age, I suppose. No matter what hatred you feel or grudge you bear, against my raw power, you stand no chance."

"Let go! Let go of me! I don't have time for this! I have to kill them!" Her mind, her memories were going dark. She couldn't recall what had made her so furious, so full of malice.

"Calm yourself. I do not have the power to erase you. The most I can do is scatter your form. As long as you persist in this world, you will eventually be able to start over. I have no quarrel with you. Just start again somewhere far from us."

There was nothing to be crushed, but Yachika felt something crunch inside of her. Something within her had broken, and she was now dissipating, scattering.

"Just like this, I am always in the shadows, protecting my charge unseen. A bizarre thing for me to say about myself, I know..."

As Yachika's consciousness faded, the last thing she heard was the strange spirit grumbling.

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"There is definitely something here!" Tomochika finally burst out as she and Atila sat idly on the couch.

I looked over the building and found nothing, Mokomoko stated.

"Really?" Tomochika had felt *something* in the air ever since they had stepped inside.

Perhaps it is a cousin to the Simulacra Phenomenon, but instead of seeing faces, you are feeling the gaze of others who do not exist.

"Are you sure? It doesn't feel like it's just my imagination. Okay, I guess it is just a gut feeling."

Atila looked at her coldly. "You are the one who broke into their house uninvited. Are you really going to complain about feeling someone else here?"

"I mean, you're not wrong, but..."

If you are so concerned, why not take a look around the house yourself? If you do not mind traipsing around another's property like that.

"In for a penny, in for a pound, right?"

I do not believe now is the time for such optimism.

Tomochika stood up.

"I am not coming with you, you know," Atila announced.

"Are you sure? This feels like the kind of situation where we'd be attacked if we split up..."

"I have Takatou and the dog here."

"Oh, so yeah, you're totally fine."

There was no real need for Atila to go with her, so Tomochika and Mokomoko went to explore the house themselves. The first floor had a living room, bath, toilet, and kitchen. They could see most of it from the living room, so their exploration was mainly on the second floor.

Tomochika didn't expect to find anything upstairs. "Hmm. It's just my gut feeling, but I feel like whatever it is is probably below us."

Oh? There is a basement, I suppose.

"That's totally suspicious!"

Is it? I think it is perfectly ordinary for a house to have a cellar.

The entrance to the basement was in the kitchen. Opening a door in the floor, Tomochika descended the stairs.

"I mean, considering what was upstairs, I can't really say I'm surprised."

The basement housed tons of dolls. Unlike the ones on the ground, many were naked or had their parts scattered about. There was also some furniture, so it was perhaps a sort of workshop for making the dolls.

"It doesn't look like anyone's hiding here." Tomochika looked around but didn't find anything strange.

So there is nothing after all.

"Sorry! I guess I was worrying over nothing!"

Just in case, she checked the second floor as well, but as expected, it was empty. And at some point during her search, the creepy feeling that had been bothering her had vanished.

Chapter 11 — Why Did I Choose to Accompany You Lot Again?

A full day passed and Yogiri was still asleep. There was no point rushing now, so Tomochika had decided to let him rest, but sitting around waiting for him to wake up was a waste of time. She decided to go out shopping on her own. She wouldn't exactly be able to do so if Yogiri was with her, and she figured it would be best to get ready so they could leave as soon as he woke up.

The moment she stepped inside, the general store began to buzz.

"What kind of outfit is that?"

"That's just indecent!"

"That's gotta be some kind of fetish, right?"

"It looks kind of evil... You think her gear is cursed?"

"What do you think we should do? Is it safe to mess with her or should we just leave?"

"I have no idea what will happen if we bother her..."

Faltering at the sudden attention, Tomochika collected herself and headed farther in. The clothes the Great Sage had given her were extremely revealing, to the point where they seemed useless as armor. She had hoped maybe equipment like that was common in the game, but the reactions around her told her she was dressed as inappropriately as she felt.

"Ugh. Maybe I should have changed after all."

Without the young man around, you cannot afford to be wearing normal clothes, though, can you?

Even inside the city, the game didn't prevent people from attacking each other, so she couldn't walk around defenseless. However, upon learning that the other equipment in the game was made from people, she couldn't bring herself to equip any other gear either, so she had few options but to wear what the Great Sage had given her.

"Maybe I should have left the shopping to Atila."

Do you think she would be capable of handling such an errand?

"Uhh...I guess not."

As a dragon, Atila lacked the common sense expected of ordinary people. She was curious about humans and trying to learn about them, but there was a good chance her ignorance would cause some problems. It was faster for Tomochika to go out shopping by herself.

In cities that were less safe, shops often kept most of their goods behind the counter, but here, the wares were all lining shelves around the stores. Being able to put what she wanted in a basket and then take it to the counter to pay made shopping here a familiar, comfortable experience.

Walking around the store, the other patrons moved to give her space. Though she drew all sorts of curious looks, no one wanted to actually interact with her. Of course, Tomochika would have done the same thing in their shoes.

"This food isn't people turned into items again, is it?" she asked, staring intently at some preserved food.

Shirou's words led me to believe he was only transforming people into equipment. Though even if that were not the case, it is not like you could avoid eating.

"Couldn't we find something to eat in the fields? Don't we have some sort of Dannoura Style technique for finding food?"

Hmm. No, we don't.

"We don't?! And here I thought the Dannoura School had thought of everything!"

When I was alive, discerning what plants were edible and hunting to support oneself while training in the wilderness were skills everyone possessed. However, I doubt such skills would be useful in an entirely unfamiliar ecology. Eating something because it looks somewhat familiar could lead to serious harm.

"Well, I can't argue if you're actually going to make a good point. Okay, I guess I'll buy these for now."

Once Yogiri was awake, they intended to head to Lasbo's area, the Castle in the Sky. They didn't know how difficult an area it was to traverse, but she felt it was best to prepare as much as possible beforehand. Gathering any tools that seemed useful and a good amount of food that would keep for a while, she brought it all to the counter. Paying with DP,

she threw everything into her item box and left the store.

Heading to a part of the city where the buildings were so sparse it felt more like a barren field, she approached one of the buildings that was especially distant. Mokomoko went ahead of her, slipping through the closed door, which quickly opened. Atila had opened it from the inside.

“I’m back!”

“I must say, I am still shocked at your brazenness. Either way, hurry inside.”

Tomochika quickly stepped into the house, closing the door behind her. The inside wasn’t particularly luxurious, but it was well kept. The main floor held a living room, bathroom, toilet, and kitchen, while the second floor was divided up into a number of private rooms.

Tomochika walked through the entrance hallway and into the living room. The large amount of dolls in the room was a bit off-putting, but they were just mundane dolls, so there was no harm in them. She figured it was pretty rude in the first place to come into another person’s home without permission and call it creepy.

“Welcome back,” Yogiri greeted her, looking up from his game console. Dai was sitting at his feet.

“Thanks. Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, I feel great.”

“I bought some food. Oh, I guess we don’t have the charger for that anymore, do we?”

“Yeah, we didn’t get one made this time. Once the battery is dead, it’s toast.”

“Did you notice no one is saying ‘part one’ and ‘part two’ anymore?” Tomochika asked, sitting down on the couch. Sion had suggested they refer to the events that happened before the reset as part one and everything afterwards as part two.

“That was just Sion’s idea, I guess.”

“There truly is something wrong with this situation,” Atila complained. “Even a dragon like me knows that taking another human’s dwelling like this is unreasonable.”

“We’re just borrowing it for a bit,” Yogiri said, brushing her off.

“Spoken like a true thief!”

“I know what we’re doing isn’t good, but it would be worse if someone

found us."

This was likely a house being used by some adventurer and their friends. They were probably out adventuring now, but there was no telling when they'd be back, so they'd just have to cross that bridge when they got to it.

"Are you so sure?" Atila asked. "The threat that Takatou poses was made clear to everyone. Would anyone really attempt to bother us?"

"We're not stealing anything, so they'll forgive us...I hope."

"If we are done here, let us leave! I have been on edge since yesterday!"

"I didn't realize a dragon would feel guilty."

"And I can hardly believe the lack of guilt you seem to feel. There is clearly something wrong with you!"

"Okay, so about what we're doing next..." Tomochika interrupted the two, going over what she had thought of while Yogiri was asleep. Yogiri had no objections, so they decided to go take the Lasbo quest.

"Okay then, I'll go to the guild and take the Lasbo hunting quest and wait. You guys come ten minutes later. We'll head into the field as soon as you arrive." Tomochika pulled a cloth bag from her item box and handed it to Yogiri. "I thought it looked about the right size to cover your face."

"Maybe I should poke some eyeholes in it."

"Wearing a bag over your head with those clothes? I cannot imagine there would be a way to stand out more," Atila commented.

Yogiri didn't seem to care one way or the other if his equipment was made from people, but either way, he was still wearing the outfit from the Great Sage. Atila's clothes had been created as part of her transformation into her human form, so she could change them as she wished, but she was still wearing her gifted clothing as well.

"It doesn't matter if he stands out. It just needs to hide his identity until we can get through the gate."

They could only hide for so long in such a small town. Tomochika's plan was to head out into the field and stay there until the game was cleared.

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"What are you doing?" Atila asked.

"I can't cut through it." Yogiri had tried to punch holes in the bag around

where his eyes would be. Afraid of making the holes too large, he couldn't put much strength behind the knife, so the surprisingly sturdy bag had refused to cut.

"It has almost been ten minutes, and you have yet to accomplish anything. Bah, hand it here!" Atila punched her fingers through the bag. Yogiri was surprised by how casually she had done it, but the holes turned out quite well.

"How did you do that with your fingers?"

"I put a flame on my fingertips for a moment to burn through the bag."

"Huh. It doesn't look burnt at all."

"Even if it were, it would still serve until we made it to the field. Let us get moving."

As Atila stood, Yogiri followed, pulling the bag over his head. Though it restricted his vision a bit, he could see in front of him, so it wasn't that bad. As he and Dai followed Atila out of the house, he realized there was another problem.

"Oh, I feel like we should lock the door behind us."

"Just forget it! Now is not the time!"

"I guess we couldn't lock it anyway. I can't open or close locks with lockpicks anyway."

Giving up on the lock, they headed to the adventurer's guild.

"Well, at least it appears no one is recognizing you for who you are."

They garnered quite a bit of attention when they stepped into the adventurer's guild, but no more than normal. Many people in the guild were looking for chances to create drama. They were often looking out for whoever entered so that they could grab any chance to earn more DP. The party's clothing seemed to pique quite a bit of interest, but no one was getting up to bother them.

Across from the entrance was the quest gate, where Tomochika was standing. She had taken the quest and was ready to leave. Yogiri took a single step towards the gate, at which every adventurer in the building turned as one to glare at him.

"Hm? Did they notice?"

"This is bad! I do not know how, but it appears they can recognize you despite your disguise!"

"I see. I guess hiding my face isn't enough."

Killing intent filled the room. Almost everyone inside had recognized him as being Yogiri.

“Die!”

“For my wife!”

Yogiri ran for the gate. Even though they were indoors, arrows and balls of fire flew, and a man with a greatsword rushed at him. They all attacked with no regard for each other, a sign of their deep-seated hatred for Yogiri.

But Yogiri ignored it all. He could tell that none of them were capable of hurting him. The greatsword struck his coat and bounced off. The arrows moved as if dodging around him, and the fireballs dissipated before reaching him. He had been told the equipment from the Great Sage was SSR quality, and it seemed it had the defensive abilities to match that.

“Dannoura!”

“Okay!”

They made it to Tomochika’s side and immediately leaped through the gate. There was an instant change in the ground beneath them. They went from walking on solid wood to their feet sinking into soft sand. Turning around, they could see the gate hovering in front of a wide open sea. Another man had made it through the gate with them. Anyone who went through the gate at the same time as the party leader would be treated as a member of that party and given the same quest, and would therefore be sent to the same field.

“Hiyah!”

Tomochika immediately leaped forward, delivering a swift kick. Taken by surprise, the man’s eyes went wide as he was sent flying back through the gate, forcing him to abandon the quest.

“We should be safe for now, right?”

I do not believe we can be so leisurely about it. They may take the same quest as us and follow.

Yogiri looked around. They were on a beach with the ocean behind them. Opposite the water was a forest. An enormous gray triangle jutted out from the center of the trees. He couldn’t be sure from this vantage point, but it looked like it could be a four-sided pyramid. It was rather tall as well, its tip reaching up to just under the clouds.

“Is that where we’re going? It doesn’t look much like a castle in the sky.”

“Looks like there’s something above it,” Tomochika mentioned.

Yogiri looked up. Above the pyramid was a thick, billowing cloud, and now that it had been pointed out, he could tell there was something behind it.

“Uh...I guess we’re supposed to go through the forest, enter the pyramid, and then get to the top to make it into the castle?” Guessing at what was being asked of them, Tomochika looked thoroughly disheartened.

“Atila, can you turn into a dragon and carry us up there?” Yogiri asked.

“I was actually getting excited about exploring inside there!” the dragon complained.

“Atila helping us move around easier is quite an advantage, isn’t it?”

Shirou had said Lasbo’s field was divided up into a number of areas. Apparently, one of those areas required the Philosopher’s Stones to progress, but they could figure that out when they found it.

“Why did I choose to accompany you lot again?” Atila grumbled as she turned back into a golden dragon.

Chapter 12 — It Is like a Blowout Sale on Philosopher's Stones!

When Hanakawa's group arrived at the Castle in the Sky field, the beach was packed with people.

"Are all these people here to fight Sir Takatou?" Hanakawa asked. "Ah, I should be careful! If I refer to him as 'sir,' some might think I am his friend."

"Hmm, I wonder. No matter how much they hate him or think killing him is fair, if they don't have a plan to fight him, gathering like this is kind of pointless," Carol said, glancing around, seeming strangely happy.

In contrast, Ryouko's face was bitter. "Even if they had a plan, it would just end in their senseless deaths. Nothing they can do will defeat him. At worst, they're threatening the end of their own world. If it was only this world on the line, I wouldn't mind, but there's no telling how far-reaching the consequences could become..."

"I heard that no one who investigated this field ever made it back. I wonder if there's a point to gathering everyone here like this?"

"Good question. If they were hunting Takatou, they would surely move on from here. It seems they're waiting here for something, though."

The three of them had come here after hearing rumors that Yogiri had been seen in the Castle in the Sky field. The news had spread like wildfire, so virtually everyone in the game had heard it.

"Hmm. Perhaps I should use my exceptional communication skills to elicit what information I can from the girls over there?" Hanakawa suggested.

"Don't make me kill you," Ryouko replied instantly.

"Even if you are going to stop me, I feel like there was a level you could have reached before death threats!"

"Sending Hanakawa to do anything will cause more problems than it'll solve, so I'll go ask," Carol said, glancing around. She must have been

looking for someone who knew what was going on. Finally, she stopped to look at one person in particular.

"Huh? You're going to ask *her*?" Ryouko said, surprised.

"Doesn't she seem interesting?"

"That is... How should I put it?" said Hanakawa. "I may be of an age where I have a healthy interest in the erotic, but to see someone so brazen about it is still somewhat unappealing. In truth, someone more proper is closer to my tastes. Ah, that is not to say I would fail to find girls like you two appealing, however."

The woman in question looked to be wearing little more than underwear. She walked around without a hint of shame, clearly confident in her voluptuous figure. The tattoo on her lower abdomen gave Hanakawa the distinct impression that she was a succubus. The men around her were throwing her furtive glances. Her attire was so bold, it felt hard to stare, even for someone as shameless as Hanakawa.

Carol stepped away to talk to the woman, returning after a short while.

"Apparently, her class is Succubus!"

"That's what you wanted to ask?!" Ryouko exclaimed.

"I would have expected as much judging by her appearance," Hanakawa added, "but it was her class, not her race? Interesting."

"Don't worry. I asked why everyone was gathered here too. Someone invited all the powerful people here to work together to defeat Takatou."

"Work together?" said Hanakawa. "I feel like no matter how many you gather, it would all be pointless."

"Oh, looks like someone's here," Carol said, turning. "Is that who invited everyone?"

Hanakawa looked across the water. There was a forest, within which rose an enormous gray pyramid, but what caught his attention was the woman in a wide-brimmed hat coming out from the trees, looking every bit a witch. She seemed a little familiar, so Hanakawa dug through his memories. She had been one of the six people Van had gathered in the guildmaster's room, which meant she had one of the Philosopher's Stones inside her.

"Yo, cheaters! Thanks for getting off your butts and coming all the way here!" the witch greeted everyone as she reached the beach, her speech rather flippant despite her appearance. "Wait, do we have some ordinary

people here too?" she asked, looking directly at Hanakawa.

"E-Excuse you! How dare you refer to me as ordinary!"

"Ah! You've got one of the Philosopher's Stones! That's fine, then." She immediately lost interest in him. "Now then, there are probably some people here who don't know me, so I'll introduce myself. My name is Evon. Just like all of you, I'm a witch who'd rather die than have to work for real. I'd planned on just waiting 'til I died, but I decided I couldn't let that Takatou guy go free, so I unlocked my powers. If he dies, the world will be reset, so let's take back that lazy, boring, slow life we always wanted!"

There was no energetic response to her words, but many were nodding in silence.

"Okay, let's share a bit of info, then. Takatou is probably headed for the castle, but unless you have seven Philosopher's Stones you can't get out of the antechamber, so he's probably stuck there. There's also a prison area, but you need a Philosopher's Stone to get through it."

"I see, I see. Then I suppose we are in the clear, but is it possible to bring this many people with us?"

A party could probably make it through if only one member had a stone, but a party was limited to four people. Hanakawa didn't know how many Philosopher's Stones were here, but with only seven of them in the game, there was no way they could get everyone through.

"Exactly! We don't have nearly enough stones," the witch said. "From what I've figured out, Takatou has a dog with one stone. I've got another, and that fatty has a third."

"Again with such disrespect! I would prefer you referred to me as 'broadly receptive'!"

"That elf girl has another one, but that seems to be it. I don't know where the last three are, but even if I did, that wouldn't be enough."

"Elf?! That is a word I cannot ignore!" Hanakawa hurriedly looked around. As Evon had said, there was a beautiful young elf with them. He immediately recognized her as one of the people in the guildmaster's room, one of those who had a Philosopher's Stone. Considering their shared experience, he thought to approach but immediately froze in place. Luu was standing beside the elf.

"Wait! Why is Luu here?!"

“Oh, so she is. She was told to give up on collecting the stones unless she wanted to join the game, so maybe that’s what she did?” Carol said upon seeing the goddess. Hanakawa did recall Alexia saying something like that to her.

“While I have endless curiosity for the elven beauty, I feel it is best to let this sleeping dragon lie.” Hanakawa discreetly hid himself in the crowd.

“So, why are we here if you know we don’t have enough stones? Are you going to tell us to fight over them?” the succubus asked.

“There’s no need for that,” the witch replied. “We can just make more!”

“What? What is this lewd witch saying?” Hanakawa said. “Those stones are fragments of a true goddess. There is no way they could be so easily replicated!” These were the same Philosopher’s Stones Yogiri was collecting to try and make it back home. If they could be so easily made, they wouldn’t have been so difficult to acquire.

“Yeah, that’s what the cheat powers are for.”

“Yeah, it really is like cheating.” At some point, a second Evon had appeared, speaking after the first.

“Excuse me? What is happening?”

“It’s pretty common for a cheat power, don’t you think? I’m just making copies of myself.”

“Okay, then. Go for it!” One of the witches bent backward, thrusting her chest out. The other casually punched a hand into her chest, tearing her heart from her body. Naturally, the wounded witch fell motionless to the ground. In Evon’s hand was what appeared to be a heart fused with some kind of transparent stone.

“That was pretty grotesque, even if it was my own heart. Anyway, let’s fix this up.” The heart in her hand burst into flame, reducing itself to ash and blowing away, leaving the transparent stone clean in her hand. At the same time, the corpse she had taken it from vanished. It seemed she could also erase the copies she made.

“So, if I do this...” Evon held the stone in both hands in front of her chest. “Yah!” She forcefully pulled her hands apart, but each still held a stone. In short, she had made two of them.

“Huh? Uh, if Luu is watching, should she not be screaming at this?” Hanakawa was shocked. He wasn’t sure what value was left in the Philosopher’s Stones if they could be copied that way. Looking over at Luu,

he saw she was frozen in shock. “Excuse me! Is that a real stone? After all, most powers that create copies end up making an inferior replica!”

“It’s not inferior at all. This is the real deal. And if it’s a problem for them to all be identical, I can change them a little bit too.”

“That is actually cheating, then!”

“Exactly. Abnormal, unconventional, and unprecedented. That’s why we call it cheating, right?”

“I-I suppose that is true...”

“And it’s way too early to be surprised. Everyone here has cheat powers like I do.”

Hanakawa looked around again. None of the people gathered here looked particularly motivated, but all of them seemed reluctantly willing to do what had to be done. Yogiri’s ability to kill anyone with his thoughts and react to killing intent had been explained to everyone by the Great Sage, but they didn’t seem to think his powers were particularly special.

“Anyway, whoever wants a stone, come and get one.”

At Evon’s invitation, they all formed a line. One by one, they grabbed a stone from her and headed off into the forest. Things were surprisingly orderly.

“It is like a blowout sale on Philosopher’s Stones! Maybe we should go get some as well!” If they had extras, they wouldn’t need to extract the one inside Hanakawa. He figured there was no reason to pass up a chance to get more.

“Don’t you already have one?” Carol asked. “Eh, whatever. She can make as many as she wants, so there’s no point in hoarding them.”

“Let us get in line!”

“I guess we might as well.”

“It really doesn’t feel like they are very important items anymore...”

As Hanakawa stepped into line, Carol and Ryouko reluctantly followed.

Evon’s first performance of splitting the stone in two must have just been for show, as she casually handed out stone after stone to everyone in line. Their turn in line came quickly, and she didn’t hesitate to hand them three stones.

“I see. So instead of traveling around to collect the stones, Sir Takatou should have been looking for someone who could copy them!”

“No one would expect to find someone who could do that,” Carol

sighed.

“And yet here she is!”

“Anyway, let’s go. These people are all confident they can kill Takatou, right? We have no idea what could happen next.”

Most of the people heading into the forest had equally crazy, cheat-like powers. None of them seemed particularly motivated to get to Yogiri first, instead reluctantly accepting that if it came down to it, they would have to deal with him themselves.

Chapter 13 — What Proof Do You Have of Such a Thing?! That Is a False Accusation!

“I suppose we should get moving as well,” Edelgart said to the frozen Luu. The goddess hadn’t moved a muscle since she’d seen the Philosopher’s Stone split in two. Not wanting to leave her behind, Edelgart and the elf, Sakut, had waited patiently for her to recover.

The woman named Luu, who had appeared out of nowhere, claimed to be a goddess. Though she needed to collect the Philosopher’s Stones, she couldn’t take them by force for some reason, so she had come to join Cavern Quest. Sakut and Edelgart were planning to get revenge against Yogiri, but they couldn’t think of how that would be possible. They had agreed to work with Luu in exchange for her help, but apparently, what she had witnessed had been too much of a shock. Luu was as still as stone herself.

“Um...I am a god, you know.”

“Yes, you mentioned that,” Sakut answered when Luu finally spoke.

“There are all kinds of gods. The scale of their powers and territories differ quite a bit.”

“The only god of interest to me is Malnarilna,” Edelgart said. “I can’t say I care much about any others, should they exist.”

“Malnarilna is nothing. Her powers only function in this world.”

“Sure, but as far as I’m concerned, this world is all that matters.” Edelgart was a bit irritated by her god being put down. People often came here from other worlds, but once they did so, they became a part of this one. There was no way for Edelgart herself to affect any other world, so she couldn’t care less about them.

“I am a god who ruled multiple worlds. A god even among gods.”

“So, like a king who rules over many lords?”

“A pretty simple metaphor, but if it helps you understand, sure.”

“Why does that matter?”

“That stone was a part of me!” Luu exclaimed. “Don’t you think it’s strange she can easily make copies of it?!”

“Doesn’t seem that odd to me. We just watched it happen, so there’s not much else to say.” Edelgart pulled out the stone she had acquired. While Luu had been standing there, frozen, Edelgart and Sakut had gone to get their own stones.

“Let me see that,” Luu said. Edelgart handed the stone to her. “It *is* the real thing. I can fuse with this,” she murmured, staring at it intently.

“Please don’t. I don’t want to get stuck up ahead.”

Luu handed the stone back.

“I can understand your shock, but don’t you think we should get moving?” Sakut asked.

“That’s right. What’s the problem if there are more stones?”

“Now that you mention it...I do still have the divine core.”

“Let me get this straight,” Edelgart said. “You were told by some higher-up not to steal the stones and ruin the game. But if you join the game, there’s no problem collecting them, right?”

“That is something I am not so sure of. Even if I follow the rules of the system, with my powers, stealing the stones from others would be easy. But then the game wouldn’t be able to proceed. So instead, I thought I should collect them as if I’m helping you out.”

“Okay. For now, let’s go to the location where we need a Philosopher’s Stones in order to pass. All the stones will end up there eventually, and Yogiri Takatou should be there as well. The more stones you have, the more powerful you’ll be, right? So this is perfect for you, isn’t it?”

“That’s right... With that many stones, I could even ignore Alexia...”

Though seeing parts of her so easily replicated was a considerable shock, it seemed Luu was starting to accept the situation.

"There's also that witch, Evon. We should probably work with her."

"True. We need to do anything we can to help with killing Yogiri Takatou," Sakut agreed. At first, she had been so overwhelmed by hatred towards Yogiri that it seemed she would lose her mind, but now she had regained a sense of composure. She understood that charging forward in blind anger wouldn't accomplish anything.

The three of them headed into the forest.

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The army of cheaters made their way through the trees together, but they quickly split up. Though they had gathered to work together, there was no sense of leadership among them. Hanakawa had gone along with them, but he felt it was better if they didn't stick together as a group. If they all confronted Yogiri at once, there was the possibility of them all dying together.

"Umm...what should we be doing now?" he asked as they walked down the forest road. He had never expected to be approaching Yogiri as part of such a large group.

"Good question," Carol replied. "If we join up with Takatou, we'll be recognized as enemies of the world, so everyone here will attack us."

"Takatou is invincible, but that doesn't mean he can protect everyone around him," Ryouko said. "There is a chance we could get caught in the cross fire if we get too close."

"Perhaps it is best to leave him be, then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sir Takatou will eventually wipe out all of his attackers. He will then be left with a tremendous mountain of Philosopher's Stones, surely enough to take him home. So why not just enjoy ourselves in this world?"

"Do you think you can live a proper life in this world?" Carol asked.

"Personally, I would like to return home too, if possible," Ryouko added.

"Even so, since we are acquainted with some Sages, I am sure we could eventually find a way to accomplish that!"

"The surface is overrun by the Seyla, though. Do you think you can last

inside this game?" As long as they were in Cavern Quest, they were safe from the Seyla. But the game wasn't a particularly safe place either.

"I think that should be no issue," Hanakawa replied. "The world is going to be reset, is it not? With Sir Takatou gone, it should all be returned to normal."

"Yeah, about that. Even if Takatou goes back to our world, won't he reappear here once the world resets?"

"Huh?" Hanakawa froze, having never even considered that. Now that he thought about it, it did seem possible.

"If Takatou is brought back here, the fight to kill him will continue. In the end, it'll keep repeating until everyone in this world is dead."

"But wait. No matter how powerful the Great Sage is, do you really think he is capable of influencing foreign worlds like that?!"

"Who knows? We can't rule out the possibility."

"Then what are we supposed to do?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" Carol said. "We just need Takatou to kill the Great Sage. Then he won't be able to reset the world anymore."

"Wait! Please do not say something so dangerous so loudly!" Hanakawa hurriedly looked around. Luckily, there was no one around them. Everyone else had already gone on ahead.

"Either way, it's better to be at Takatou's side, don't you think? No matter what happens, he's going to be at the center of it."

"I cannot say that sounds particularly appealing..." he grumbled. They were talking about someone who could inflict instant, unavoidable death. Though Yogiri wouldn't kill them if they weren't enemies, that didn't mean Hanakawa felt safe around him. After all, it was pretty standard for his gross habits to infuriate the people around him.

In truth, Sir Takatou's death would actually be most convenient for me...

Even if he wanted to live in this world, it was being thrown into chaos by Yogiri's presence. If he was gone, things wouldn't be so insane. There would be plenty of room for Hanakawa to hide in some corner of the world and build up a harem.

Even though I was brought here against my will, I had longed for a second chance to be summoned to this world! At this rate, it will all be for nothing. Is there no way to neutralize Sir Takatou's powers?

"What are you plotting now?"

“Eh?! Wh-Why would you assume I am plotting? Wh-What proof do you have of such a thing?! That is a false accusation!” Hanakawa was flustered by Carol’s question.

“The proof is the disgusting look that was on your face.”

“I would prefer you describe it as a *fearless* expression!”

“Japanese is really difficult, huh?”

“I’m sure you two are having fun with this stupid conversation, but we’re being left behind,” Ryouko interjected.

“I do not believe there is any need for us to keep up with them—though it appears something is happening up ahead.” Having leveled up as a Monk, Hanakawa had obtained a skill that allowed him to sense the spirits of others. He could use that to find hidden enemies. That skill was now telling him ten people had stopped ahead.

“Sounds suspicious...”

“The only thing ahead of us is that big pyramid we saw from the beach, right? If that’s where we have to go, we can’t really avoid them.” Carol also had a skill that gave her an understanding of the environment around them, even beyond the people in it.

“W-Well, there is no meaning in adventurers fighting amongst themselves here, is there? They are all working together to slay Sir Takatou, after all.”

Everyone was working to kill Yogiri, so there was nothing to be gained by killing each other. There was no bonus for being there first. He just needed to be dealt with by someone. If so, there was no problem going on ahead.

Telling himself that, Hanakawa continued forward. Emerging from the forest, he was greeted by a large wall stretching to his left and right. Looking up, he saw that the wall continued upward like a staircase. Though he couldn’t see well from this distance, this must have been the pyramid. There was some space between it and the forest, where some adventurers had started gathering, but the one who stood out the most was, of course, the succubus. It looked like she was facing off against the other adventurers.

The succubus had posed to show off her figure, while a short distance away stood three men. For a brief moment, Hanakawa was confused, having sensed more people than that before arriving, but then he noticed the blood. Bodies had been torn apart and scattered across the ground. It was

hard to tell how many had died, but it couldn't be less than five.

"What on earth happened here?! This suddenly seems extremely dangerous!"

"Oh, it's Carol! Hi!" the succubus called out happily. It seemed she had taken a liking to Carol after their brief conversation.

Chapter 14 — And Let Me Guess, Your Chop Has the Power of a Punch?

The moment they stepped out of the forest into a clearing, the scantily clad woman in front of them suddenly turned and shouted, “Succubus Cutter!”

Birou had no time to react. Everyone here had powers far beyond what ordinary humans could ever hope to achieve, but they could still be taken by surprise. Countless crescent blades erupted from the woman’s lower abdomen, slashing apart everyone around her. The blades sought out their victims’ vitals, killing them in an instant.

Only four survived, Birou among them. He and his partner, Saloa, had been saved by his automatic absolute defense field. Two others survived somehow, but they were not unharmed, judging by the blood coating them.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” There were any number of ways he could have responded, but Birou reflexively shouted that one question.

“Just a bit of screening. Anyone who would die from an attack like that would be useless.”

There was nothing weak about the people she had killed. They all had excellent defense and likely had regenerative abilities to instantly heal most wounds they might have taken. Her power was just that much stronger than theirs.

But that didn’t make her unstoppable. Though he had been caught off guard, Birou’s absolute defense field meant he had nothing to fear from her.

Just as he considered counterattacking, someone else arrived.

“What on earth happened here?! This suddenly seems extremely dangerous!”

“Oh, it’s Carol! Hi!” The woman was distracted by the newcomers.

“Saloa!” Birou called.

“Got it!” Saloa immediately readied her bow and fired. The arrow, wrapped in an intense light, blew off the succubus’s arms.

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The arrow, like a beam of light, obliterated their enemy's arms. She had attempted to dodge, but even being grazed by the arrow had dismembered her. The arrow continued into the woods behind her, punching a hole through the trees.

"Owwww. That was really cool, but girls are no good to me." Despite her reaction, she didn't seem to be in any pain.

"I suspect we have stumbled onto a battle far beyond our capabilities!" Hanakawa cried.

"It appears that way. In a fight of this scale, we're helpless," Ryouko agreed.

"But still, we knew that when we decided to go meet up with Takatou, right?" Now that Carol mentioned it, they really didn't have any part in this mission to kill Yogiri. They wanted to meet up with him but had no real plan to accomplish it.

"Saloa, keep going!"

The young girl, Saloa, drew her bow again. As if more power was being poured into it, the arrow glowed even brighter than before, and at the moment of release, it sent her flying back.

What she fired could hardly be called an arrow. Something like a small sun shot straight for the succubus, who made no attempt to dodge it. Was she too injured to move? Or did she just know she wouldn't be able to evade in time? She stood perfectly still as the ball of light raced towards her.

The projectile struck, releasing a tremendous roar as it exploded. The resulting shock wave was so intense that it forced Hanakawa to grab on to a nearby tree to avoid being blown away.

"I cannot imagine anyone would survive such an attack..." When the wind settled and the dust cleared, Hanakawa looked at the archer's victim. A charred mass, unrecognizable as human, lay smoking on the ground. But the succubus was behind it, deep in a passionate kiss with a man. "Is she seriously doing that right now?!"

Two of the adventurers standing against her had moved to her side. One had stood in front of her, blocking the blast, while the other was lost in her embrace. The succubus threw him away like he was a piece of garbage. Her

missing arm had returned, and the man she had discarded fell motionless to the ground, shrunken and desiccated.

“I suppose since she is a succubus, she can steal the life energy of others?” Hanakawa ventured.

“And she used her succubus powers to manipulate that other man into protecting her?” Carol added.

“You’re both right!” the woman said, answering their speculations with glee.

“So what?” the man facing off against the succubus said. “We have a perfect defense and an overwhelming attack. You’re still going to die.” The only ones left were him and the girl who appeared to be his partner, but Hanakawa didn’t understand why the battle had even started.

“Hm? Are you sure your defense is so perfect?” the succubus asked. “We can still talk and see each other, so it’s not blocking light or sound, is it?”

A transparent dome covered the two adventurers. That must have been what had protected them from the succubus’s attack.

“You think a beam or sound attack will work on us?”

“Hmm. I do have a Succubus Beam and Succubus Arrow attack.”

“And let me guess, your chop has the power of a punch?” Hanakawa interjected.

“Exactly! Wait, are you really old enough to get that reference?”

“No, I just came across it on the Internet. Uhh...” Hanakawa suddenly realized how aroused he felt. “Urgh... I-I swear, I am far more interested in an assertive but proper woman than someone so brazen...” He slouched. It was far too embarrassing a state for him to show to Ryouko and Carol.

“Birou?! What’s wrong?!” But there was another man here under the influence of the succubus. As if he was losing vision, his eyes were failing to focus on anything.

“This is...bad... Run...”

“I just have to kill her, right?!” Saloa shot three more arrows. Though fired recklessly, they were no less accurate. The arrows of light had plenty of power behind them, easily enough to kill the succubus, but they never made it to the target.

“What the?! What are you doing?!” Saloa cried. But the barrier protecting them was gone. It had suddenly moved to cover the succubus,

protecting her instead.

Birou swung his sword, swiftly beheading his partner.

“Yes, good boy. Come here,” said the succubus.

The adventurer stumbled over at her command.

“Wait, does that mean I am next? Am I going to be violated in all sorts of ways by this woman?” Although he was afraid, Hanakawa couldn’t quite keep the anticipation from his voice.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. I don’t really need you.”

“Huh? Then why are your charms being aimed at me? Should the next logical step not be to subordinate myself to you?”

“Ah! That was an accident. I wasn’t actually aiming at you. I pick guys based on their faces, after all.”

Hanakawa felt his arousal recede as the succubus suppressed her own power.

“Just to be sure, you’re not planning on fighting us, are you?” Carol asked.

“Nope. I just wanted some pawns. I wouldn’t steal your boy anyway.”

“Honestly, I’d be more than happy to let you have him.”

“Hmmm... Sorry. I appreciate the offer, but as much as I don’t want to be picky, everyone has their limits, right?”

“I would also like to object!” Hanakawa declared.

“If you wanted pawns, why didn’t you bring some with you from the start?” Carol didn’t feel it was necessary to start the mission here. Hanakawa agreed. Collecting pawns here, of all places, was just begging for trouble.

“Normally guys are expendable. If I sleep with them, I can steal their levels, but that leaves them all empty.”

Hanakawa used his Discernment skill to check the succubus’s stats. “Level...63,000?! Just how much perversion have you been indulging in?!” Anyone joining Cavern Quest had their level reset to 1. Considering her current level, she must have had an incredible number of victims.

“That’s just what a succubus does,” she replied shamelessly. “Oh, right. The Philosopher’s Stones. Go pick them up,” she ordered Birou, who immediately set about searching through the corpses. His dazed, dreamy state made it clear he was under the succubus’s total control.

As he handed the stones he collected over to her, she slid them into her

chest. Clearly, there wasn't enough space there to hold multiple stones, so she must have had something similar to the item box skill she could access from there.

"Okay, I'm gonna go look for some more pawns. See you."

Birou lifted her up and carried her off towards the pyramid.

"What on earth just happened?" Hanakawa felt like he had been entirely left behind by the situation.

"Hm. Don't you think it's possible she could beat Takatou?" Carol asked, as if she had just thought of something.

"I cannot say I am so sure about that," Hanakawa replied.

"Trying to look sexy to seduce him isn't really an attack, is it?"

"I see! There is always the possibility she could enthrall him, although now that I think about it, there could hardly be any other way to defeat him, could there?"

Defeating Yogiri meant overcoming his automatic defenses. In other words, you needed to attack him in a way that wasn't an attack. Seduction may have been the perfect solution. He showed enough interest in Tomochika that he was clearly into women. Seducing him seemed like a far better tactic than trying to fight him head-on.

"I'm not so sure, though I suppose I haven't heard of any similar cases in the past..." Ryouko seemed incapable of denying the possibility.

"The way you say that makes it sound as if you wish for him to be defeated," Hanakawa commented.

"Of course," Carol replied. "If it were possible to kill him, I'd do it in an instant. Having him around is a huge pain."

"What?!"

"Ryouko would say the same thing, right? Her organization gave up after seeing he was invincible, but if it were possible to neutralize him somehow, they'd jump at the chance. Anyone from any world would feel the same way, don't you think?"

"Well..."

"Either way, I have no idea if the succubus will be able to take him. It's not like he's alone."

They didn't know what Yogiri's party looked like at the moment, but in the past, he'd only had women with him, so that was likely still the case now. His companions might be able to handle the succubus for him.

“But that option is always available to us,” Carol continued. “We’re kunoichi, aren’t we? The art of seduction is an important part of our toolbox!”

“True.” Ryouko nodded. “We have kept a considerable distance from him out of fear, but perhaps we should be making more effort to get close to him. Rather than leaving it all to Dannoura, we should be trying to take her place...”

“I could see it with the ponytailed warrior type, but the blonde-haired ninja speaking broken Japanese? That seems a bit too unorthodox for seduction play.”

“Ohhh! I’m getting real close to killing you now! Do I need to show just how strong we kunoichi are?” From seemingly nowhere, a knife appeared in Carol’s hand, thrust to within a hair’s breadth of Hanakawa’s eyes.

“This is exactly what I am saying! That kind of behavior is what makes you unsuited to the task! You should be aiming to display the virtues of a woman, not a kunoichi!”

As attractive as Carol was, Hanakawa couldn’t overlook the flaws in her character.

Chapter 15 — He Looks Dead, but I Don’t Think It’s My Fault

Yogiri had thought that by riding Atila up into the clouds, they would be able to bypass any annoying gimmicks in the pyramid, but things weren’t going to be so easy. As they made it into the wall of clouds, a sudden impact threw them into confusion.

Something had tossed him into the air. Looking around, he found Atila falling, her wings motionless, while Tomochika and Dai were flailing helplessly as they plummeted.

“What happened?!” Tomochika cried.

“Maybe we hit something.”

Atila would know best, but she was stunned at the moment.

“We’re kind of falling here! We’re going to hit the ground!”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Yogiri replied.

“How can you say that?!”

“It doesn’t look like we’re going to die.”

“That’s not comforting at all!”

Similar to his ability to sense others’ intent to harm him, Yogiri could also tell when he was in a situation that could threaten his life. Stabilizing himself in the air, he moved closer to Tomochika and grabbed hold of her.

“What?!” The sudden action took her by surprise, but a moment later, they were in the forest. Plunging violently through the trees, they struck the ground hard. Anyone would expect them to die from such a fall, or even if a miracle occurred and they survived, to no doubt suffer crippling injuries.

“Ow...”

“Wait, how are we okay?!”

They were basically unharmed. Though they felt the impact on their bodies, it was a little different from tripping and falling on the road.

I imagine it is due to the effects of the armor the Great Sage gave you, Mokomoko suggested.

It seemed capable of protecting them from falling a great distance.

"Dai looks okay...but where's Atila?!" asked Tomochika.

Standing up, they looked around.

"Looks like she got the worst of it, huh?" Yogiri observed. The enormous dragon was sticking out of the ground. Her body had knocked aside the trees, forming a small clearing where she'd landed. "You okay?" he asked, stepping up to her side.

"Of course not!" the dragon snapped back, transforming into her human form. She didn't have any visible injuries, so she was likely fine.

"Mokomoko, do you know where we are?"

Hmm. Allow me to take a look. The ghost floated up into the air, returning shortly. *We are about a hundred meters from the pyramid. It feels like we simply took a shortcut through the forest.*

"Then I guess it wasn't for nothing."

"I don't think I could take it if all that pain was for nothing!"

They were in no position to be casually lounging around in the forest. "Well, if it's right near us, let's—" The moment Yogiri thought to start moving, he felt killing intent wash over them.

"Uh..." Tomochika murmured.

I suppose your landing was hardly a quiet affair.

The forest around them began to stir. The trees shook, and the roars of various beasts echoed around them. The unrest in the area was clear even without Yogiri's abilities. Dai began to growl, hackles raised. Though he was a rather gentle dog, it seemed he was gutsy as well.

The group huddled together, watching their surroundings. Whatever was surrounding them didn't seem to have any intention of waiting to see what they would do. Creatures lunged at them from the trees, coming from all directions, before immediately crashing lifeless to the ground, felled by Yogiri's power. They were wolves, significantly larger than Dai.

"They look pretty strong."

"Still died on their own, though, didn't they?" Tomochika said.

Yogiri's powers wouldn't automatically activate to protect him if the attack could be blocked by the Great Sage's armor, so these wolves must have been strong enough to harm them.

In the end, they are only like armor in a video game. If this is the final boss's area, even the most powerful armor will not stand up to these

monsters.

One after another, other monsters attacked. A giant lion, a horned horse, a translucent blob, a frogman, a tentacled sphere, a one-eyed giant, and a multi-headed snake all appeared, and all died in quick succession. The small clearing that Atila's falling body had made was covered in corpses in no time.

"A game where the enemies all die on their own without even fighting must really suck," Tomochika commented.

"That's reality for you." In a game, a balanced, nail-biting fight was fun, but in real life, Yogiri always felt it was better to take the safest route.

"I suppose we have cleared out all the monsters around here?" Atila asked, looking around. The woods around them had seemed to calm somewhat.

"But still, that's way too many monsters, don't you think?" Yogiri replied.

"Right?" Tomochika agreed. "Sure, we stood out considering how we fell into the forest, and this is the last boss's field, but having so many monsters crowded around feels like something's wrong."

Perhaps the cause is up there?

Yogiri followed Mokomoko's gaze up into the sky. An enormous monster floated above them. The unnerving creature stared down at them with numerous eyes, looking like a collection of internal organs that had been torn from some giant and fused together. Something was falling out of the creature, plopping to the ground. As the formless lumps of flesh fell, they transformed. One became a lizardman, another a six-legged horse, and another a bird wrapped in flames.

"Die."

Yogiri killed the sickening monster in the sky. Though it hadn't directly attacked them, leaving it alone meant fighting an endless stream of enemies. He couldn't just let it live.

Though he had no idea how it had been flying, once it was dead, it began to fall. The monster dropped into the forest, the impact shaking the ground around them.

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Asuha Kouriyama and Yuuichirou Kiryuu were convinced their powers were enough to defeat Yogiri Takatou.

Of course, the ability to kill anything with his thoughts was incredible. But it was only a threat if he could use it on them. They just needed to kill him before he could perceive their killing intent and fight back. Asuha was sure their abilities were up to the task.

Her class was Beauty Coordinator, just as it had been before the reset. Though it wasn't a class suited to combat, it excelled at charming others. Immediately after arriving in this world, she had used her powers to turn Yogiri and the others left on the bus into bait. Basically, she could make others look like an appealing meal.

The first time, Yuuichirou had failed to accept the Battlesong system properly, but this time he had received the class of Master Assassin. His specialty was Stealth and Certain Death. Of course, his stealth abilities included making himself invisible, but he could also make other people, objects, and even abilities impossible to perceive. His Certain Death skill allowed him to directly attack the insides of a target he selected. Once he had locked on, no amount of distance, no number of obstacles, no kind of defense would save them. It could be called an instant death power of its own.

Their plan was simple. Yuuichirou would use his Stealth skill to hide them, and Asuha would use her Charm Up skill on Yogiri and his friends. The effect would make them glow, but Yuuichirou's abilities could counter that side effect, so it wasn't a problem. At full power, her Charm Up skill would draw the nearby monsters in to attack Yogiri all at once. A large number of monsters may have been enough to kill him in and of itself, but that was just a cover. Yuuichirou would hide among the attackers and use his Certain Death skill. The only difficulty with their plan was that both the Lock-On skill and the Charm Up skill required them to see their target, meaning they had to get reasonably close.

The two of them entered the Castle in the Sky field, intent on carrying out their plan. They figured Yogiri would make his way there eventually. They found a number of other parties there, so they set up in a place away from the others. It didn't matter who killed Yogiri, so there was no point fighting over who got the honor.

Asuha and Yuuichirou waited at the pyramid in the center of the field.

They remained hidden there for half a day before it happened. A dragon suddenly fell from the sky. The impact created a loud crash, resounding throughout the forest. When they went to see what had happened, they found Yogiri was there, having fallen with the dragon.

"What kind of getup is that?" Asuha asked.

Yogiri was in all black, as if he had embraced his role as the villain. Tomochika's highly revealing outfit also made her look like she was just screwing around.

"Something's wrong with him," Yuuichirou said. "No normal person could kill his classmates without feeling anything."

"Makes it easier for us, though."

There was no impression that Yogiri felt the least bit of guilt. That meant Asuha would be able to carry out her plan without hesitation.

“I guess we can’t complain about killing classmates, can we? At least we have a good reason for this, though.”

When they had first arrived in this world, Asuha had used her Charm Up skill on Yuuichirou and the others on the bus to turn them into bait. As a result, he had been killed by a dragon, so it was hard to understand why he would work with her now.

But they were connected through another of their classmates: Romiko Jougasaki. She was a close friend of Asuha’s, and Yuuichirou had fallen in love with her, so the two had joined forces to bring her back to life.

“Charm Up!” Asuha used her skill at full power.

Yogiri’s body began to glow with a blinding light, but only to Asuha’s and Yuuichirou’s eyes. Nothing happened to Asuha in return. She had assumed as much, but it seemed using Charm Up didn’t count as trying to kill him.

The two quickly ran off. The area would be swarming with monsters any minute now. Once they had gotten a good distance away, they moved on to the next part of their plan. Yuuichirou picked up a rock. His Certain Death would send it directly inside his target. The skill’s primary weakness was that it could only work with things small enough to be carried in one hand, but even a pebble sent to a target’s brain would kill them instantly. All they had to do now was wait for the chaos to begin. Through his Lock-On skill, Yuuichirou could see what was happening, but Asuha was left to wait fidgeting in the dark.

“What are you waiting for?!”

“For this.” Yuuichirou collapsed to the ground.

“Huh?”

Asuha couldn’t understand what had happened. She shook him, but he didn’t move. Stunned, she finally realized Yogiri might have killed him, but even then it was hard for her to believe. She couldn’t process it. Seeing someone drop dead for no apparent reason in front of her wasn’t enough to convince her it was Yogiri’s doing.

Her plan had failed. With no backup in place, she had no idea what to do.

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The floating monstrosity above them had apparently been the source of the attack, as once it had been dealt with, the monsters stopped coming.

“That was a tough enemy. I guess I should expect it from the last field in the game.”

“You thought it was tough?!” Tomochika exclaimed.

“Uh, emotionally tiring?”

“Pretty sure that’s just your imagination.”

“Anyway, things seem to have calmed down. Let’s get moving.”

Though the heaps of corpses around them had no visible injuries, being surrounded by dead bodies wasn’t a pleasant experience.

They decided to head for the pyramid. Weaving through the dense trees was a pain, but with only a hundred meters to travel, it didn’t take long to reach their destination. Making it out of the forest, they were met with what looked like an enormous gray wall. The enormous stones stacked on top of each other were certainly forming a pyramid, but it was far bigger in scope than any Yogiri had seen before. Each of the stones making it up were ten meters tall.

“Climbing up the outside isn’t an option, is it?”

“Absolutely not!” Atila asserted. After their last experience trying to cheat the system, finding the proper route seemed safer.

“There’s got to be an entrance somewhere... Oh, there’s a body over here!” Looking around, Tomochika found what looked like an adventurer lying beside the pyramid.

Another one of the young man’s victims?

“Hey! He wouldn’t do something like that!” Tomochika objected.

“It’s not totally impossible,” Yogiri said. If the person in question had tried to attack him from a distance, they could have fallen victim to his power without him even knowing it. With the number of monsters that had been attacking them earlier, it wouldn’t be surprising if he failed to notice this one person among them.

“Should we...deal with him?”

“We should probably consider everyone else our enemy...but I guess we can save that for when they attack us.”

Leaving a body lying out in the open left a bad taste in Yogiri’s mouth, so they moved to approach the fallen man. He looked like a knight in his silver armor, but it was clear he was dead. His breastplate was covered in

blood. There was a hole there, as if something had punched through it straight into his heart.

"He looks dead, but I don't think it's my fault." The area around him was torn up, as if there had been a fight here.

"Wait, isn't this Rick?!" Tomochika cried in shock.

"Now that you mention it, it might be."

Richard, the third prince of the Kingdom of Manii. A man who had worked with them in the tower and was now, for some reason, lying there dead.

Chapter 16 — Interlude: I’m Happy It Only Cost Me This Much, Because This Isn’t Nearly Enough

When the Swordmaster Urabe awoke, his first feeling was relief. For the past three days, he had suffered from terribly unpleasant dreams. After long years of training, he had defeated all the other Knights of the Divine King to attain the rank of Swordmaster, only to be forced into the unbearably boring job of watching over the Dark God’s prison. After he’d spent the majority of his life in some tower out in the Garula Canyon, the seal ended up breaking, and he was killed by some stranger. He couldn’t think of it as anything but a nightmare.

“I guess things aren’t that much different for me, but it’s a lot more freedom than I had in that shitty dream.”

He wasn’t completely free, but at least he wasn’t trapped in a single place. And he had acquired the title of Swordmaster he had striven for. He had no intention of abandoning his role of protecting the world; not with his pride.

After making himself presentable, he stepped out of his tent and was greeted by a bizarre scenery. Everything glittered. The grass, the trees, even the small animals running around. Almost everything that made up the plain had crystallized, reflecting the light of the sun.

These were the Meld Plains, also called the Crystal Plains, a wicked land that brooked no human habitation. There was a train station served by a number of workers on the edge of the plain, but only a few people could survive to reach the center where Urabe now stood.

There were five tents around him, where his companions were resting. The only ones with them were the Divine King and her elites.

“It looks like the crystallization is speeding up after all.” The Divine King stood alone at the center of their encampment.

“You’re up early,” Urabe quipped.

“A symptom of my old age.” Despite what she said, the Divine King looked plenty youthful. Based on appearance alone, Urabe looked far older. That said, the Divine King had been involved in the founding of the Axis Church, so she should have been at least a thousand years old. For the Axis Church, which revered no god in particular, she was close to being a god herself.

“Look at this.”

Urabe caught the object the Divine King threw at him. It was a piece of dried meat, its outer layer already starting to crystallize. Using his knife to peel off the crystal, he popped the rest into his mouth. Normally, the crystallization process was one that took months. Anything inside the plain would crystallize given enough time, but they had never seen it happen within the span of a few days before.

“Is it because of those dangerous creatures?” he asked. Three days prior, some kind of unknown creature had begun falling from the sky. It was immortal and contagious, spreading itself throughout the world in mere moments. Those who had survived the initial assault had either accepted the Sage’s invitation to join Cavern Quest or found a place to hide.

But they didn’t know how long they could survive this way. Normally, the Divine King and her Knights were the very people to fight such a threat, but they had decided that the events transpiring in the Meld Plains were more pressing.

“It is certainly possible.”

Urabe followed the Divine King’s gaze up into the sky. There was something like a crystalline net there, scattering the sunlight that shone through it. If any of those creatures had fallen in this area, they would have been shredded apart by the net. But there was no damage to it or any sign anything had slipped through it. It seemed the plain was free of those creatures. Apparently, they, too, were susceptible to the plain’s crystallization, so they avoided this place.

“For example, maybe the Spider is accelerating the crystallization process to protect itself from those creatures?” the Divine King posited.

“That would mean the Spider’s seal has already broken...though I suppose we should probably assume that is the case, given the circumstances.”

“If those creatures are trying to avoid crystallization, maybe we can use it to seal them away?”

“That isn’t an option. It would end with the whole world being turned to crystal. Of course, I’m not sure that is much worse than being overrun by those creatures.”

“Hmm. But it is something to think about. The creatures appear mindless, but they’re intelligent enough to avoid this place. And they may be immortal, but they can still be influenced by this crystallization process. There may be a way to deal with them after all.”

Although investigating the situation in the Meld Plains was their priority, they couldn’t put off dealing with the issue forever. Even if it took some time, the creatures would cover the whole world eventually.

“Now then, I don’t believe we have the time to relax here. Let us hurry on ahead.”

The Knights had awoken, so after cleaning up their camp, the party set out for the ruins. This world housed a number of dangerous entities. Sealing them away had created a temporary era of peace, but those seals weakened over time, and occasionally mad cultists attempted to break the seals on the gods they worshipped. The role of the Divine King, the Swordmaster, and the Knights was to protect the world from those threats.

The Meld Plains was home to such an imprisoned being, known as the Spider. Everything being crystallized here was a result of its powers leaking through the seal. The area under its effects was rather limited, so with care, it wouldn’t normally be an issue. But recently, that area began expanding. Their group had come to investigate the cause of that expansion.

Kicking aside the crystalline grass, they made it to a forest of crystal trees. The ruins housing the Spider were inside.

One of the Knights guided them into the forest. When they made it inside, it became clear the trees hadn’t just crystallized. Countless crystalline threads had been strung around and between them.

“Is this...the same as that net in the sky?”

“Yes. The Spider’s spawn make these. Not that I have ever seen them before.”

Their guide was the Knight responsible for this area. The Meld Plains wasn’t a particularly dangerous region, so they didn’t have someone permanently stationed there. The Knights’ only responsibility was to

occasionally return to check up on the area, so they likely didn't know much more than the rumors.

Passing through the forest, they came upon a clearing, a place called the Spring. A circular cavity about fifty meters across, it was covered in ice with a faint glow.

"This is as far as I usually go for my inspections...but it definitely looks like something has changed."

The center of the spring was broken. A hole had been smashed into it.

"The ruins are in here?" the Swordmaster asked.

"Yes. There are a number of seals layered here, the spring being the outermost one."

"If this is a sign the Spider has escaped, then it's already over, isn't it?" Urabe thought back to the tower. If they'd had a similar device set up to monitor the seal here, they never would have been caught unaware. But that tower, and the High Wizard who had created it, had all been a dream. Nothing like that existed in real life. They had no option but to inspect the seals manually every once in a while.

The Divine King aired her doubts. "No, the Spider isn't small. It shouldn't have been able to escape from a hole that size."

As she said, the hole was only large enough for two or three people to pass through at a time. Of course, Urabe hadn't been around to see the Spider during its rampage a thousand years ago, so he had no idea how large it was, but the Divine King had been involved in trapping it here in the first place, so he didn't doubt her.

"The seal itself seems intact. Its spawn shouldn't be able to get this close to it." The fact that the spring still glowed was proof that the seal was keeping the evil at bay.

"So monsters weren't the ones who broke through it, then," the Swordmaster said.

"Indeed. A powerful monster may have been able to destroy the seal entirely, but in that case, it wouldn't have stopped at a small hole like this."

"So the Spider is still inside?"

"Most likely. If it had escaped, we'd be dealing with more than an accelerated crystallization outside."

"In that case, what happened?"

"Who knows? We'll have to go inside and find out for ourselves. Urabe

and I will be enough. Everyone else, stand guard here."

Urabe immediately accepted the Divine King's decision. If they were dealing with a Dark God that had been freed from its seal, the other Knights would only slow them down. The two of them walked over to the spring, approaching the hole. Miasma poured out of it. It seemed the hole was responsible for accelerating the crystallization of the surrounding area.

The inside was dark, but the Swordmaster had no problem seeing in the dark. The inside of the hole was like a cave.

The two leaped inside. After a fall of a few dozen meters, they struck the ground. Such a distance was no problem for them.

They looked around. They appeared to be in some kind of natural cave, but every surface had turned to crystal. Though they had jumped in through a hole, there was a staircase carved into one of the walls, meaning there was likely another proper route to get inside.

"This miasma is pretty intense," Urabe commented.

"Indeed. It makes it a lot easier to tell."

Urabe immediately realized what the Divine King meant. Despite the miasma filling the cave, there were still traces of clean air, stretching like a thin line into the depths.

"A Holy Sword, huh?" she said.

"A Holy Sword could be anything from garbage to a legend."

"This feels more like the latter. I feel I recognize this one."

"Which means...someone from the royal family—or someone associated with us."

"If they are one of us, they may have noticed the Dark God's impending revival and moved to deal with it themselves."

The Divine King seemed to believe there was no way a Knight would be responsible for breaking the seal, but Urabe wasn't so sure. Knights were chosen entirely based on their strength. They couldn't say every one of them was just and pure.

That one girl was quite a bit of trouble. What did we end up doing with her sword?

Urabe couldn't recall that particular Knight very well. He thought she had the rank of Thunderous Blade, and her "sword" was a wire-like weapon so thin it was mostly invisible, but the more he thought about her, the less he could believe such a capricious Knight ever existed.

“Anyway, we’ll find out when we go.”

Following the presence of the Holy Sword, they made their way through the cave. There were a number of faintly glowing walls blocking their progress, but someone had already punched through them, so they had no issue continuing forward. As they walked, the cave began to widen and eventually deposited them in a large chamber. In each of the chamber’s four corners was a small tower, and they had all been cut down. A square structure sat in the center, its door broken down to allow entry.

“This is bad, isn’t it?”

“Yes. The shell of the seal is broken.”

“So these are the ruins? What about the inside?”

“The structure itself sits over the Spider’s body, while the sealing towers were positioned over its head, abdomen, and each of its eight legs. Those ten towers form the main body of the seal—”

She was interrupted by a tremendous roar as the building in front of them exploded. The two looked up to see that something had punched through the building from below. A large tower, covered in all sorts of intricate carvings, was now embedded deep in the ceiling of the cavern.

“That wouldn’t be one of your towers, would it?”

“This is bad! We need to head to where the Spider—”

The Divine King made to start running, but the ground split open in front of her, forcing her to stop. A second tower erupted from the ground. In short order, the remaining pillars followed suit, opening an enormous hole before them. Ten pillars were now embedded in the ceiling.

“Looks like the seal’s broken. How strong is this Spider?”

“It took three days and three nights of combat for me to lock it away.”

“Sounds tough.”

“Do what you can to retrieve those towers,” the Divine King said, glaring down at the hole in the floor.

“Those?” Urabe sighed, looking up at the ceiling. It seemed the towers would be necessary to overcome the trial before them. But he couldn’t just go get them. He would need to watch the fight between the Spider and the Divine King closely, only moving when they showed an opening.

Urabe looked at the hole just as something leaped out of it.

“Huh?” He had expected an enormous spider, so it took him entirely by surprise. It was neither Dark God nor monster, but an ordinary human. And

one that Urabe recognized. “You’re...”

Ein. A man Urabe had given the Gift to in his role as Swordmaster. Many people came to ask him for the Gift, but not many walked away with the class of Hero, so Urabe remembered him. But that was all he knew about him. Urabe had no idea what had happened to the man after he became a Hero.

The Divine King and the Heroes both fought enemies of this world. They had similar missions, but while the Divine King and her Knights worked together as an organized group, the Heroes all worked independently.

“The Holy Sword Cartena. Then you must be the Hero Ein,” The Divine King said, looking at the sword at his hip.

Urabe didn’t know its name, but he recognized it as a Holy Sword immediately. The pure aura it emanated was impossible to miss.

“You know him?”

“I was the one who gave him Cartena. But I don’t understand. Why are you here?”

“The Divine King and the Swordmaster. I have no intention of fighting you. I would appreciate it if you let me pass,” Ein called out politely. There was a respectful air to his speech.

“I don’t think that’s gonna be possible. What happened to your arm?”

Ein’s right arm had completely crystallized and was exuding a sinister miasma. “Oh, this? The Spider gave it to me. I’m happy it only cost me this much, because this isn’t nearly enough.”

“You... You took in the Spider?!” The Divine King drew her sword and dashed forward.

Ein pointed his right hand at the ground. Pillars of crystal filled the cavern. Erupting from the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, the spears of crystal exuded the same sinister aura as his hand. The Divine King cut through the crystalline pillars, but Ein was already gone.

“It seems the Spider has quite a grudge against you, but it is well aware it can’t defeat you as it is now, so I have managed to convince it to retreat. Farewell. Hopefully we won’t have to meet again.”

They couldn’t pinpoint where his voice was coming from. Ein had fled and was already long gone.

“Follow him!” the Divine King commanded.

“Do you know where he went?”

“He said this wasn’t enough. He may be intending to break more of the seals!” She ran back through the cave.

Urabe began to feel this was going to be a pain in the ass.

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The creature known as the Wolf King was getting frustrated. No matter how long it fought, the constant wave of enemies never ceased. The wolf knew instinctively it couldn’t make physical contact with them, which meant it couldn’t use its primary means of attacking: its teeth and claws.

It could use the shock wave of its howl to obliterate them, but it was still a losing battle. Although none of its enemies were particularly strong, they regenerated rapidly. They infected all living things around them, constantly increasing in number, so it would only be a matter of time before the wolf was exhausted.

It began to panic. At this rate, it wouldn’t be able to reunite with its master, nor would it be able to search for the goddess. How could it get out of this situation? Though its mind raced, it couldn’t find any way to break the deadlock.

Meanwhile, the enemies were growing larger. One had absorbed the others around it and turned into a giant. They were attempting to surround and trap the wolf.

Howl.

Howl.

Howl.

It continued using its only method of fighting back, but there were limits to that as well. The enemy had grown large enough that it could absorb the impact of those shock waves. It was over.

But the moment the wolf gave up, something changed.

“Hiyaaaaah!”

There was a shout, and the enemy was suddenly enveloped in flames. It screamed in pain. Even if it could regenerate, being burned alive still hurt.

“Yo, long time no see.”

The wolf turned its head, puzzled. A woman with long hair and a flashy outfit now sat on its back. Its master, Hiruko, who it had been separated

from when it came to this world, was stroking the back of its head. “Don’t give me that angry look! I didn’t forget you at all! Things just changed so suddenly, I got confused!”

The wolf had been thinking no such thing, but Hiruko clearly felt guilty about it.

“Uhh, what was your name again? Whatever. Puppy will do.” It seemed she had forgotten after all. The wolf didn’t have such a bland name, but it immediately gave up. If that’s what its master called it, that was its name.

“Man, this is a real pickle. Feels like we’re in a time loop or something.”

Things had seemed strange to Puppy, so it could accept it was part of some sort of loop.

“But this is much better than last time. I don’t know where they are, but all we gotta do is find some Sage or that Takatou guy.”

According to Hiruko, the goddess had been turned into objects known as Philosopher’s Stones. These were held by the Sages, and a boy named Takatou was collecting them. At least, that was what Hiruko remembered from before the loop. The people living in this world didn’t seem to realize that time had reset, believing everything before to be a dream, but a goddess like Hiruko wouldn’t be fooled.

“Do you remember, Puppy? Some spiky guy cut you in two.”

Now that she mentioned it, it did remember being killed, but its memories of the event were vague.

“Anyway, we gotta look for those Sages, but...it looks like splitting up isn’t a great idea.” If they did, there was a good chance Puppy would be overwhelmed by the creatures again. The situation was frustrating, but it recognized it wasn’t capable of surviving alone.

“I have no idea where to even start, though! Well, with Takatou collecting the stones again, I’m sure ma will be back in no time.”

If a few of the stones were gathered, they would fuse together and give the goddess a small amount of her power back. That would be enough for Hiruko to track her down.

“Well...I guess that means we just gotta wait ’til then, huh?”

At some point, the fire keeping the mysterious creatures at bay had died. Apparently, not even Hiruko could destroy them.

“Oh well. We’ll be fine if we fly.”

Puppy’s body floated up into the air. Hiruko’s power lifted the two of

them up, taking them up into the sky and out of reach of the creatures.

“But this only buys us some time. We’ll need to figure something out.”

Hiruko glanced down. The mysterious creatures were gathered on the ground beneath them, desperately reaching up into the sky. The sky would likely not be safe for very much longer.

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Chapter 17 — It Appears You Have Some Business to Resolve, So I Will Be Going On Ahead

A tall, thin man stood facing an enormous bear in the forest. It was far larger than seemed reasonable, and even though it was on all fours, he had to look up at it. In various places across its body, its fur had hardened like stone. The hardened fur made a spear on its head and blades on its knees and elbows, creating an impressively murderous appearance.

In contrast, the man held only a sword and shield, luxurious as they were. Though the glittering gems adorning his gear said nothing of their usefulness, it did make them look expensive. The armor he wore, on the other hand, was plain leather. The plain, almost poor-looking armor struck a dissonant chord with his other equipment.

“Um, excuse me! Could you please help? Like with that Goddess Beam or something?!” the poor man, Lynel, whined desperately.

He was a terribly unlucky man who had met Yogiri during the trial in the tower. The UEG had changed his luck for the better, which should have persisted through the world’s reset, but his luck wasn’t good enough to save him from having to fight a monster like this on his own, so he wasn’t exactly celebrating it.

“I don’t know, I don’t think it’s proper for a goddess to mess with human games.” A short distance away from Lynel and the bear, a woman sat idly on a rock, entirely uninterested in the events taking place before her. Wearing an outfit that barely covered any of her voluptuous body, she was the goddess Vahanato. Various spears, swords, and shields floated in the air around her, similar to the ones she had lent to Lynel.

In reality, Vahanato shouldn’t have been in the world at this point in time. When the world was reset, those who came from outside were forced to wait outside until the time they had entered the world the first time came

around again, but Vahanato had used her connection with Lynel to force her way in early. For that reason, she couldn't stray far from Lynel's side. They were stuck together for now.

"Whoa!"

The bear moved with unbelievable speed, considering its massive body. Closing the distance between them in an instant, it struck Lynel with one of its paws. Lynel's shield easily deflected the blow, the shield moving the hand wielding it rather than the other way around. With a cry, the bear leaped back. The paw that had struck the shield was smoking, a result of the shield fighting back on its own.

"See? With my weapons, you can fight this thing no problem. Hurry up and take care of it."

"Easy for you to say..."

If the shield would protect him of its own accord, he could ignore defense and focus on attacking. That should be enough for him to win eventually. But Lynel was still hesitant. He had already lost to the pressure and bloodlust given off by his opponent. It saw him as nothing more than a meal, its eyes flashing with madness. Apparently, he looked quite delicious, as even now drool was pouring from its mouth, a strong musk filling the air.

"Come on! You don't have to get close to it! Just point the tip at it!"

The bear reared up on its hind legs in a threatening posture.

"L-Like this? Whoa!" Still hesitant, Lynel timidly lifted his sword to point at the bear. The blade unleashed a burst of light, throwing him back onto his rear. Something had launched out of the sword, and he hadn't been able to take the recoil.

Still seated, he looked up at the bear. Its right shoulder had vanished. Its right foreleg dropped to the ground, the shoulder and chest it had been connected to having vanished. It was almost as if some circle had passed through it, erasing everything it touched.

"Come on, aim properly."

"I didn't know it was going to shoot anything! And I don't know the timing either!"

"It's all in your head! Think something like, 'I'm gonna kill this guy right now!' and the timing will sort itself out!"

Surprisingly, despite being so wounded, the bear hadn't lost the will to fight. It charged forward on two legs, lifting its remaining foreleg to attack.

Lynel screamed, immediately giving in to panic. He lost all sense of what was going on, flailing his sword and shield around aimlessly.

"Ahhhhhh! Huh?"

After a while of swinging wildly with his eyes closed, he realized nothing was happening. Hesitantly, he opened his eyes. Most of the bear was gone. A small part of its legs was left, but so much was gone that no one would have been able to tell it was once a bear.

"See? You won't lose to something like that. Why are you so scared of everything? It's getting kind of annoying. And you call yourself one of my believers?" the goddess said, stepping over and looking down at him.

"Uh...I don't remember ever saying that I was."

"Then now's the time! Declare your faith in the goddess Vahanato!"

"What?! No, I'm a member of the Axis Church..."

"Don't worry, I'm very gracious! I'm fine with you having two beliefs! Now say it!"

"Ugh... I believe in Vahanato..."

In truth, he had no desire to follow such a wicked god. She couldn't even exist here without his help, so if he rejected her now, he doubted she would kill him. But she *would* start sulking. That would almost be worse. He would rather declare his faith in her than face that.

"Very good! Now, stand up! We don't have time to be sitting around here."

Vahanato's goal was revenge. She wanted to find the ones responsible for killing her and her darling Albagarma and kill them with her own hands. Lynel had been wrapped up in her quest, proving that even changing his luck for the better didn't free him from his unlucky fate.

"Is this really the right way?"

They were in the Castle in the Sky field of Cavern Quest, in the forest at the entrance. Of course, they were here in search of Yogiri. A short time after they'd met, bizarre creatures had started raining from the sky. A man calling himself the Sage Van had sent a message to the entire world, inviting everyone to play his game Cavern Quest to avoid the demonic creatures.

Lynel had found the invitation suspicious and hadn't joined the game. Luckily, with Vahanato at his side, he knew he could deal with the creatures. Yogiri would have been able to handle them as well, so he figured

there was a good chance he was on the surface too. They'd decided to search the surface first but quickly learned they wouldn't accomplish much by doing so. It had been entirely overrun by the mysterious creatures, becoming a living hell. No amount of searching through it seemed likely to net them any success.

As they began to think that, they had received a message from the Great Sage. He had explained about the world being reset and about everything Yogiri had done, informing people that he was an enemy of the world who absolutely needed to be defeated. The message also told them that Yogiri was in Cavern Quest, so Lynel and Vahanato had finally followed him in. Upon their arrival, rumors that Yogiri had left for the quest to defeat Lasbo were spreading like wildfire. Hearing that, the two immediately set out to follow him, bringing them to their present situation.

"Who knows? That building is the only thing here, right?" Being a goddess didn't give Vahanato knowledge of everything. For a number of reasons, her power here was limited.

Lynel stood up, deciding to head upward. He walked slowly through the forest, Vahanato floating alongside him.

"Can you make me float too?"

"No way. Too much work. I have to save my power for the right time. I can't waste it here!"

"Okay..."

At present, her abilities were limited to the beam of light she could fire, which she called her Goddess Beam, the weapons floating in the air around her, and the ability to float in the air herself. She may have been capable of more, but she was keeping those powers in reserve.

They slowly made their way out of the forest, arriving at a gray wall. It was an enormous pile of stone blocks, a structure the size of a mountain. It grew narrower as it went up, so it seemed to be some kind of pyramid.

"I'm guessing we can't climb this."

"Hmm...looks like there's a barrier. You'll be knocked down if you try to go up the outside."

"Maybe there's an entrance somewhere?" Lynel looked around, but as far as he could see, there were no doors.

"Okay then, go that way!" Vahanato snapped a finger in one direction.

"Is there a door over there?"

“No idea. It’s just my intuition as a goddess!”

Lynel sighed. But he had no clue which direction the door would be in either, so in the end he sided with Vahanato’s intuition. Walking along the wall, they found a square hole that looked like it could be an entrance. A woman was standing alone in front of it, wearing a pair of glasses. She had a calm air about her.

“Uhh, hello.”

“Hello.” She returned the greeting with a smile. At least she didn’t seem to be hostile.

“Umm, is this the entrance? You’re heading up too?”

“So it seems. It looks like the entrance to me. I’ve done what I can to investigate it, but you can’t see anything inside from here.”

Lynel walked up beside the woman, peering into the square hole. It was large enough for two people to walk through side by side, but it was unnaturally dark. There was no clue as to what lay ahead.

“Is anyone in there?!” Lynel tried shouting, but there was no impression of his voice reaching inside. It felt like he was shouting at a wall.

“My apologies. I have yet to introduce myself. My name is Celestina. I worked as a concierge at a hotel in Quenza. I guess now I am an adventurer.” Now that she mentioned it, her outfit did look like she was a staff member at a high-class hotel.

“Uh, nice to meet you. My name is Lynel. I’m not an adventurer or anything, so I guess I’m unemployed, ha ha.”

You’re not unemployed at all. Serving me is your job.

Looking towards the voice, he found Vahanato was gone. It seemed she didn’t want to show herself to other people.

“There were a number of other entrances, but they were all the same. It is too dark to see anything inside.”

I see. Try attacking it with that sword.

“Are you sure?! If there’s someone inside, they could get hurt!”

Bad luck for them. Hurry up and do it!

“Fine.”

The conversation made it look like Lynel was talking to himself, but Vahanato didn’t seem to care. Lynel reluctantly raised his sword towards the black square hole. He squeezed the hilt, imagining an attack. The sword shone, firing a ball of light. It sank into the blackness, but that was all. It

didn’t illuminate the interior, and there was no sound of it striking anything. It felt like he hadn’t done anything at all.

Now try sticking the sword in it.

Lynel hesitantly poked the sword into the hole. It sank into the darkness, feeling like no more than empty air.

So we can still go inside. I guess we’ll have to just go in.

“Hold on; this is really suspicious!”

So what? We can’t just stick around here forever.

“That’s true, but...”

“Looks like someone else is here,” Celestina said, looking at the forest. Lynel turned to follow her gaze, where he saw a man stepping out from the trees.

“Oh? If it isn’t Lynel!”

“Huh? Rick? Oh no, stay away! Don’t come any closer!”

The new arrival was a man in silver armor. He had been a reliable ally during their trial in the tower, but meeting him here was terrible.

“Is something wrong?” Rick asked, confused. He likely hadn’t expected such a reaction from Lynel.

“Oh? What a coincidence to see you here. Seems like a good omen to me.” Vahanato had appeared again.

“You...” Rick was immediately on guard, glaring at the goddess. These two had a connection from the past. Before the reset, Rick had been the one to deal her the finishing blow.

“My apologies. It appears you have some business to resolve, so I will be going on ahead,” said Celestina.

“Ah, wait!”

But Celestina stepped into the darkness. As she’d said, Lynel and Rick’s situation was none of her business, so at the first sign of trouble, going on ahead may have been the correct choice. But Lynel still felt her response was a bit cold.

“Noooow then. How do we deal with you?” Vahanato was licking her lips.

It didn’t seem there was anything Lynel could do to stop her.

Chapter 18 — Now I'm Mad! No More Mrs. Nice Goddess!

Yogiri Takatou had to die. That was the natural conclusion that Richard, also known as Rick, came to. That just cause came well before any sort of friendship they may have had. Though he wasn't sure he would be of any use in the effort, he was a member of the royal family and so possessed their inherited ability.

Even if that wasn't particularly useful, the fact that they were acquainted meant Yogiri may let his guard down around him. Rick would do whatever it took to take Yogiri down. Even if his actions ended in his own death, that alone might provide at least some information for those who would come after him. Even a seemingly meaningless death had meaning in a fight against Yogiri.

However, if he died out here before even reaching his target, it would truly be a pointless death.

"Is there any way we can talk this through?" Richard asked cautiously. Vahanato seemed more than ready to fight. He couldn't imagine her letting him go. But she hadn't attacked him on sight. There was a chance there was room for negotiation.

"Talk things through, huh? That only works if we have something to negotiate, right? I don't think that applies to us."

"I disagree. If all you wish for is my death, I suspect there is a high likelihood I will lose my life in the battle against Yogiri Takatou. Would you consider staying your hand until that battle is resolved?"

"Absolutely not. I want to kill you with my own hands. You going off and dying somewhere else doesn't mean anything. You don't have any choice but to die here. All that needs to be decided is... Hmm. How pathetic will your death be? And how much will your suffering improve my mood?"

It seemed there was no talking to her. Richard looked to Lynel at her side.

“U-Umm!” Lynel spoke up. “We’re both trying to kill Yogiri, so should we really be fighting each other and reducing our fighting strength?”

“Are you serious? Come on, a fight? Anything with this guy isn’t going to be a fight at all. I’m just going to thrash him. It’s not going to cost me anything.”

“B-But still! If Takatou dies, the world is going to be reset again, isn’t it? So Rick will just end up coming back to life! What’s the point of killing him now? Isn’t it more efficient to kill Takatou first?”

“Revenge isn’t a problem of efficiency. I never cared enough about this guy to seek him out and kill him, but now that he’s in front of me, I feel like I might as well. That’s all there is to it.”

“I-I see. I suppose you’re right...” Lynel had done what he could to stay the goddess’s hand, but it didn’t seem to be working. As humiliating as it was, it seemed Vahanato didn’t consider Richard to be especially important. She was just interested in getting his death out of the way, so there wasn’t any room for negotiation.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you in one hit or anything. First of all, let’s see. It would be a pain if you ran and hid, so why don’t I get rid of one of your legs?”

Vahanato fired a ball of light from her palm. The projectile moved at a tremendous speed, until it was struck by Richard’s sword and dissipated.

“Huh?”

She tilted her head in confusion. She had never doubted that the attack would hit, and that it would blow off his leg when it did. The reality in front of her was so far beyond her expectations, it left her in a state of total confusion. Even when she was playing around, there should have been no way for Richard to react in time to her attacks, let alone to completely stop them.

A number of factors had played into this outcome. She hadn’t intended to kill him, so she had been holding back. Since she was outside her own territory as a goddess, she couldn’t wield her full powers. She was using her connection with Lynel to force herself into the world before the correct time. The Holy Sword Orz, which Richard wielded, was blessed with a divine power, making it especially effective against evil. Orz had its own will and memory, so the god-slaying power it had awakened to upon killing Vahanato the first time remained. Richard still had his memories of being

the Swordmaster.

No single one of these factors was enough to protect Richard from her attack, but with all of them together, Richard was just barely strong enough to fight back.

“Ah, I get it. That sword is the one that killed me, so it’s got the concept of god-slaying infused into it now. Now I’m mad! No more Mrs. Nice Goddess!” Vahanato brought the weapons floating around her to bear, each of them firing a beam of light all at once. Her attack had been stopped when she was holding back, but what would happen if she went all out?

Apparently, Richard would still survive. The sword couldn’t block all of the beams of light, but by lifting the sword up, he could force the beams of light off of their trajectories. That gave him enough room to dodge around them. Of course, he wasn’t entirely unharmed, as even the shock waves created by the attack were enough to hurt him. But it didn’t seem Vahanato’s power was so overwhelming that she could end the fight immediately.

“Whaaaaat?! What the heck?! What is going on here?! This is wrong! Something is definitely wrong!”

Richard’s attacks couldn’t reach her. Even if he could dodge around her attacks, he couldn’t get close to her. But neither could Vahanato’s attacks finish him off.

At this rate, though...

He was somehow managing to survive, but there was no hope for him to come out ahead in the end. He could try to run away, but the moment he diverted even a little attention from avoiding her attacks, he would likely die. The only thing keeping him alive was his courage to face her head-on.

“Give those back!”

“I never asked for them in the first place!”

The sword and shield Lynel was carrying flew back to Vahanato. Though it only gave her two more weapons, that was enough to significantly increase the intensity of her attack. Richard knew he wouldn’t last much longer, so he decided to take a gamble.

It’s all or nothing...

Richard threw his knife. It was an ordinary throwing knife, a basic side weapon with no special abilities. A weapon like that wouldn’t even scratch a god. Richard knew it wouldn’t be of any use against her.

“Gah!” Struck by the knife, Lynel cried in pain. It hadn’t hit him dead on, but it had grazed the back of his neck. Though he pressed a hand to the wound, it wasn’t enough to stop the flow of blood. It wouldn’t be a fatal wound, but Lynel’s face was starting to pale. He had never expected he would be attacked in this situation.

“Hey! What are you doing?! Aren’t you two friends?! Why is he attacking you?!” Vahanato complained.

“We’re really just acquaintances. If his life is on the line, I don’t see why he *wouldn’t* attack me...” Lynel muttered.

Richard didn’t know if there was any point attacking Lynel, but Lynel and the goddess were traveling together. He had hoped to distract her slightly, and it seemed to be working perfectly.

The shield floating around Vahanato glowed with a pale light that then enveloped Lynel. With her focus now on healing her companion, her attack had softened. It appeared that attacking Lynel had put her in a difficult spot.

Avoiding her attacks, Richard edged closer. As he did, the trajectory of Vahanato’s attacks began to change. She couldn’t risk hitting Lynel by accident. The number of attacks was clearly dropping.

“Hey, is it okay if I blow you up with him?” Vahanato asked Lynel.

“You’re letting me decide that?!”

“Okay, how about this? You just go on ahead.”

“Huh?” Lynel blurted out in surprise as a pair of Vahanato’s weapons lined up beside him and picked him up off the ground, throwing him towards the building behind them. Rough as it was, the throw managed to send him into the darkness of the entrance.

“Now I can attack you without worrying about anything!” Vahanato declared. The power of her attacks spiked again. Barely able to survive, Richard lost all room to plan.

“Guh!”

“It’s too bad I can’t go easy on you, but I’m super happy you’re still alive! Killing you easily here wouldn’t be satisfying!”

Richard was barely managing to avoid her attacks in his desperation, but he knew he was on thin ice, and it was starting to crack. A beam of light punched through his right arm. Unable to keep a grip on his sword, he accepted that this was the end.

There was a flash of light. Bright enough to blind him, the powerful

impact struck his entire body, sending him flying backwards. After slamming into something behind him, he dropped to the ground. He was alive, barely, but that was all. He didn't have the strength to stand and had no idea what state his body was in. He was well beyond being able to fight. Even a small child would have been able to take his life in this state. Was dying a meaningless death here the best he could amount to? As he sank into regret, he heard Vahanato's voice.

"What? What the heck was that?! Where did you come from?!" It was neither a celebration of victory, nor a mockery of the loser. She sounded confused.

What happened?

Had the attack come from someone else? In a daze, he noticed that Vahanato had disappeared. That may have simply been because Richard's senses were failing him, and she may have even now been approaching to finish him off, but he couldn't tell.

"Hey, boss! This guy's still breathin'!"

"Oh? He's a human, isn't he? The fact it couldn't kill a human is concerning, but it did seem to work on that other woman."

"Yeah, it stuck into her good. She was definitely bleedin'."

"Maybe it's just a gear issue. She was practically naked while this guy has armor."

"Er, I dunno if I should say this, but..."

"What is it?"

"This guy kind of looks like you, boss."

"You think so? I don't care that much about my looks, so I didn't notice..."

Richard could tell a number of people were approaching. If he could ascertain that much, his senses must have been telling the truth when they told him that Vahanato had left.

"Hey. Who are you?"

"I am...Richard...third prince...of Manii..." Trying to leverage his identity might have been pointless now. But if there was even the slightest chance it could save him, it was worth a shot.

"Prince?! Why would a prince be in a place like this?! Sounds fishy to me!"

"Cavern Quest doesn't care about who you were on the surface. There's

no point lying about being a prince down here."

"That said, we're pirates. Only one thing to do with a prince."

"Interesting. Looks like he's telling the truth after all."

"How do you figure?"

"That sword."

"What about it? Wait, is it glowing? Is that an ancient relic too? I thought people couldn't use magic near you, boss."

"I've never heard of such a thing, but it would make sense for the royal family to have swords that can use their abilities even through our seal."

Richard didn't know who these people were, but if they knew about the royal family's ability to nullify the Gift, they may have been related. That meant they might save him.

But the moment that thought pushed through the fog in his head, it was immediately struck down. A fresh, incredible pain shot through his already aching body. The feeling of something sharp punched through his armor, through his flesh, into his heart. For the second time in his life, he felt a sensation that should only ever happen once.

"I don't know if you're my brother, cousin, second cousin, or whatever. But if you've got royal blood, you can die here." The woman spat the last words Richard heard.

Chapter 19 — If This Was a Game, They Would Make Sure to Leave One Out for Us

Since Richard was a friend of theirs, they couldn't just leave his body lying out in the open, so Yogiri and Tomochika decided to bury him in the forest.

"He is your friend, not mine. Why do I have to help?"

"I'm pretty sure you met him too, Atila," said Tomochika.

"And it would be a ton of work for us without any tools for digging," Yogiri added.

Though not without complaint, Atila changed into her dragon form and easily dug up a portion of ground. She put Richard into the hole and covered him in dirt, so Yogiri and Tomochika had nothing to do but watch.

"Now that I think about it...I don't actually know the funeral customs for this world. Was burying him a good idea?"

"It is far too late to be worrying about that now," Atila said as she returned to her human form, giving Yogiri a withering look.

Even if this is incorrect, surely it is better than leaving his body lying there.

"I'm curious about what happened here...but it's not like we'll be able to figure it out ourselves. I guess we just have to move on."

They returned to the enormous pyramid. While looking for an entrance, they found a square hole near where they had found Richard's body. It was just large enough for two people to walk through side by side, but inside it was pitch black. No light seemed to be penetrating, making the interior a mystery.

"Mokomoko, can you see what's inside?"

I suppose I can take a look. Mokomoko floated towards the pyramid, where she promptly bounced off the wall. *Gah! What was that?!*

“Wait, you can’t get through the wall?!”

I-Indeed! It appears there is some sort of barrier here.

“Why don’t you try going through the entrance?”

I suppose. I guess I will have to follow the rules for once. Mokomoko entered the square hole, easily slipping inside.

“Uh...is she coming back?!” Tomochika exclaimed. After waiting for a while, there was no sign of the ghost.

“I wonder what happened,” Yogiri said. “Is there something dangerous inside?”

“Like a trap?”

“We could find another entrance, but...that sounds like a pain.” The pyramid was the size of a mountain. Checking the entire perimeter would take them days. “I guess we should just go in for now.”

“Are you sure?!”

“It doesn’t look like our lives are in danger.” If Yogiri’s intuition said so, they could be sure they’d survive stepping inside. But that was no evidence that there were no traps either. “Okay, let’s hold hands again,” Yogiri suggested. It may have only been to make him feel better, but if it was a teleportation trap, there was a chance that would help them stick together. He grabbed Tomochika’s hand in his right and Atila’s in his left while she sat on Dai’s back.

The four of them stepped through the entrance. For a moment, everything went black, but suddenly there was light again.

It appears to only permit movement one way. There was nothing I could do.

Mokomoko was waiting for them on the other side. Yogiri looked back, but there was only a plain stone wall behind them.

“I guess we can’t just send Mokomoko scouting ahead anymore...”

The ceiling had a dull glow to it, illuminating their surroundings. They were in a corridor made of gray stone. About ten meters across and ten meters tall, it continued in a straight line in front of them. There were no windows or ornamentation, giving it a rather stark feeling.

“I guess this is the prison area,” Tomochika observed. “Even Mokomoko can’t leave once inside.”

Indeed. Since I was unable to leave, I took the liberty of looking around. This place appears to be some sort of labyrinth.

“That’s...kind of a pain,” Yogiri said. Judging by the outside of the pyramid, the place was rather large. If the inside was a maze, getting out would be a real challenge.

“Did you find a way up?” Tomochika asked.

Not within the area I searched. I cannot stray too far from your side, so I could not go far.

“Speaking of which, was it okay for you to be separated from her through that barrier?”

To be frank, I was in significant danger. If you had decided to head back to town and treat yourself to a buffet, I would have disappeared.

“Yeah, we’re not *that* heartless.”

“Walking around aimlessly seems like a bad idea. Is there a map somewhere?”

“Why on earth would a map just be lying around?” Atila replied, disbelief clear in her voice.

“If this was a game, they would make sure to leave one out for us.”

We will have to map out the dungeon ourselves.

Imagining the amount of time it would take to map out a place this large was pretty discouraging. As Yogiri tried to think of a better way, Dai walked off.

“Huh? Does he know where to go?” The dog’s steps were full of confidence, as if inviting them to follow.

“How would he?”

“Maybe he can smell something?”

We were told that one needs a Philosopher’s Stone to pass through this area. Dai possesses one such stone. Perhaps it allows him to know the correct path?

“I guess we might as well follow him.”

With no idea where to go, there wasn’t much to lose from following the dog’s intuition. Dai gave a happy bark.

◇◇◇

Even if a person was merely a stranger met in passing, there was a chance they would someday be a guest at her hotel. That line of thinking led Celestina to treat anyone she met with kindness. There was an extremely

high chance that she would never be able to return to the surface, so worrying about the hotel wouldn't accomplish much for her, but it was still something that she took pride in.

That said, she knew enough not to stick her head into situations that were too much for her. Although she wouldn't hesitate to put her life on the line to save her guests, Lynel was a random man she had met by chance. If she weighed her choices, the scale would definitely tip towards her mission over him.

She knew Richard, the third prince of the Kingdom of Manii, but as someone who had cut herself off from the royal family, she had no reason to prioritize him either. Her priority right now was to deal with Yogiri Takatou and let the world reset, not protect the prince.

Yogiri had been a guest at her hotel, but after killing over sixty million people, including plenty of her other guests, friends, and acquaintances, she couldn't see him as anything but an enemy. She was sure that many people felt the same way and were even now pursuing him. It might have been okay to leave things to them, but she felt that if her participation even slightly increased their odds of success, it was worth it.

"As expected, no exit."

The entrance she had just walked through became a solid wall. Thinking it could be an illusion, she tried to touch it, but it was as solid as it looked. Her thread was still connected to a tree outside, but nothing from the outside was being communicated through it anymore.

She had similarly failed to find out anything about the interior from the outside using her thread, meaning there was likely some sort of trick set up to divide the inside and outside.

At any rate, now that she was inside, she could use her thread, so she sent the extremely thin string out into her surroundings. The corridor was about ten meters in width and height. It proceeded in a straight line for a while before splitting off in multiple directions. Those corridors divided further, giving the impression of a labyrinth. The ceiling had a dull glow to it, providing enough light for her to see her surroundings. That said, the corridor was just bare stone, so there wasn't much to gain from lighting it. The thread she was using had a limited range of five kilometers, but there was nothing in that range that stood out to her.

Her investigation of the pyramid had revealed those square entrances

about once every kilometer, but she had no idea where she was inside. So with no clues, she picked a direction and started walking.

She proceeded carefully, using her thread to investigate her surroundings, but she couldn't get a good grasp on the full layout of the place. It was huge, with countless branching paths. Making it through the maze would take a tremendous amount of time. But with no other option, she continued moving forward. She used her thread to rip apart the monsters she occasionally encountered and to create landmarks for herself, drawing a map in her notebook as she went.

Just as she was starting to lose sense of how long she had been in the labyrinth, she noticed other people. Not just one or two—it seemed that, all at once, a huge crowd of people had arrived, regularly appearing from the walls. A number of them even noticed her probing strings, meaning they were likely quite powerful.

The newcomers had no hesitation in their steps. It seemed they knew where they were going. Celestina used her thread to investigate what looked like their destination. People were starting to disappear once they reached a certain point. Since something was likely there, Celestina headed towards that spot.

At the place where they disappeared, she found a square opening. It was the same as the ones on the outside of the pyramid, wide enough for two people to walk through at once. She attempted to send her thread through to investigate, but it was blocked. Though she hadn't been able to determine anything from outside the pyramid, the entrances there had at least let her thread enter. It seemed the rules were different here. When she reached a hand into it, she found that the darkness repelled her. It felt like a smooth, slippery wall.

"Is there some trick here?"

She focused her threads together to investigate the area in detail but found nothing of note. Aside from what appeared to be an entrance, all she saw were stone walls and the floor.

"Hey, girl. What's wrong?"

Celestina slowly turned around. Her threads had warned her of the approaching group, a young boy and three girls, so she wasn't surprised to see them.

"I am attempting to see if I can get through this doorway."

“Oh, really? Lemme see.”

Celestina moved out of the way to let the boy approach.

“One of these, huh? So...maybe this’ll work?” He stretched a hand towards the blackness, and it easily passed through. “So, yeah. You need a Philosopher’s Stone to get through.”

“A Philosopher’s Stone?”

“Yep. Here, you can have one.” The boy held out a round, transparent stone to her.

“Hold on! Why are you giving away something so important?!” one of his companions complained.

“What do you mean? She’s stuck, isn’t she?”

“It’s her own fault for coming here without doing any research! How are we going to get through if you give one of our stones away?!”

“We only need one for the party, right?” the boy answered. “And you each have one. If we have four, we can afford to give one up.”

“You have no idea if that’s how it works! What happens if you’re the only one who can’t go in?!”

“Then I’ll just find some random guy and take his stone! I couldn’t do something that mean to a girl, after all.”

“And stop trying to recruit every girl you see!”

“Excuse me...are you sure it is okay for me to take one?” Celestina was hesitant to accept the gift since it seemed like their group wasn’t in agreement.

“It’s fine!” The boy didn’t have any intention of listening to his companions.

“Very well; then I will borrow it for a time.”

She had no idea whether she’d be able to give it back, but if she needed it to proceed, she had no choice but to try. Celestina took the stone. The moment she had it in her hand, she immediately realized that the black square was a gate leading to the next level. Simply possessing the stone helped her to figure out where the gates were. Now that she had a stone, she tried passing a hand through the darkness, and it slipped through without issue. It seemed that possessing the item was the requirement to pass after all.

Celestina stepped inside. Upon passing through the gate, she was presented with a staircase. She attempted to investigate her surroundings

with her thread but only found another gate up ahead of her. Behind her was a stone wall, meaning the gates were still one-way.

She climbed the stairs and passed through the next gate. Another stone corridor greeted her. It proceeded straight ahead before branching off into multiple paths, identical in construction to the previous level.

"Hey! Short time no see!"

As she investigated her surroundings, the boy from before appeared beside her.

"Only one person in the party needed a stone after all?" she asked.

"Yep. So don't worry, you can keep that one."

"Thank you."

The boy had come with his three companions, meaning the gates seemed to work on a party-by-party basis. Parties were determined when one initiated a quest, so there was no way for Celestina to join one at this stage. Her only option was to keep one of the Philosopher's Stones.

"Looks like the next gate is over there," the boy observed.

"Yes, my intuition tells me the same thing. Shall we travel together?"

"Sure! We're all headed to the same place anyway."

Even if one of them went ahead, they'd all end up together in the end. It wouldn't change much if they tried to travel separately.

"My name's Irza. These girls are Karin, Claire, and Azra."

"My name is Celestina."

The girls made no move to greet her. It appeared they weren't happy that Irza had taken an interest in her.

With the once-concierge at the lead, the group set out again.

"Are you going to fight that Takatou guy too?" Irza asked her. "That's our plan, but I'm starting to wonder if there's a point with so many other people here."

"Yes, I am sure there are many people here far stronger than me, so I also considered leaving things up to them. However, I felt there might still be some way in which I could help."

"Oh yeah? It still feels like a waste of time. But this is the biggest thing happening in the world right now, so I kinda wanna take a look. 'Cause if I just ignored it and let everyone else solve it, later I'll be like, 'Dammit, I should've gone and taken a look!'"

"Do you have some method to deal with Yogiri Takatou?" Celestina

asked.

“Not really? I’m sure I’ll figure it out when I get there.”

Irza seemed incredibly optimistic. Celestina couldn’t help but feel skeptical about Yogiri’s powers as well. The thought of someone who could kill with their thoughts or in response to another’s killing intent was a bit hard to believe. Even if that’s how it appeared to work, the natural response for an observer was to think there was some kind of trick behind it. She imagined everyone who was now pursuing Yogiri felt the same. But if the Great Sage’s description of his abilities was accurate, then there was no way to fight him at all, turning the whole endeavor into little more than a mass suicide.

“Mind if I go first here?” Irza asked as they approached the next gate.

“By all means,” Celestina replied. Getting there first didn’t mean anything, so there was no need for them to rush.

With her permission, Irza and his companions stepped through the gate. After a short time, she followed him in. They had already ascended the stairs and made it up through the next gate.

As Celestina did the same, she reflexively took defensive action. She wrapped her thread around her body the instant she was through, taking a wide step. She felt countless reactions from the thread. Tiny, flea-sized insects were swarming her. She shredded them all to pieces.

“I didn’t expect anything like that!”

Irza stood beside the entrance, looking perfectly fine, but his three companions had collapsed onto the ground. Their skin had turned gray as the insects swarmed them. It appeared they were attacking somehow, so the girls were likely dead. If they found a defenseless target, they’d have no difficulty getting into the body through the eyes or nose and destroying it from the inside. Those three weren’t the only victims, though. A large number of people had fallen to the ground around them.

“Are you okay, Irza?!” Celestina cried.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I feel bad for those three, though.”

“My apologies. I failed to predict something like this might happen. If I had gone first...”

“Don’t worry about it! I can just bring them back to life.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, once we get these bugs off them. But we should probably deal

with the guy who did this first." Irza looked down the corridor.

"If they died from something like this, they were in no position to be fighting someone who can inflict instant death. They'd just be in the way, so why not clean them up here?" a grotesque looking figure called back to them from down the corridor. At first glance it appeared human, but it had three eyes and wore glasses with three lenses to match.

"Who are you?"

"I am one of Gorbagion's Four Heavenly Kings, Graze the Enlightened. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"I am—"

"Ah, no need to introduce yourself. As the man boasting the most powerful brain among the Four Heavenly Kings, I need only see you to recognize your identity, Celestina of the Absolute Blade."

Celestina couldn't help but feel surprised. Despite his title, he didn't speak like someone particularly intelligent, but he had guessed her name correctly.

Was he watching us on our way here?

She had introduced herself to Irza shortly beforehand, so it was possible that was how he knew her name, but it was still strange for him to know her title.

"You pass. Please, continue on ahead."

"What are you doing here, Mr. Graze?" she asked plainly, unable to grasp what he was trying to accomplish.

"My objective is the same as yours: to slay Yogiri Takatou. However, I am aligned with the monster faction here in Cavern Quest. There is no artistry in us cooperating with all of you."

"Hey, hey, what about me?"

"Ah, Irza. You possess...a growth cheat, a magical power cheat, and a predation cheat. We have no need for someone like you," Graze said, entirely disappointed.

"What? Really? I feel like I'm more useful than *you*."

"Not at all. Having powerful magic or being strong yourself only makes you better at doing something that everyone else can already do. No matter how strong that makes you, it leaves you on a level far below us. You need something more."

"Then why don't I try something?"

“By all means.”

“Okay, here I go!” Irza disappeared, reappearing behind Graze. Either he had moved blindingly fast or he had teleported instantly. From his new position, Graze was all but defenseless against him. But before he could attack, a giant hand grabbed him.

“What?!”

“Ah, my apologies for the late introduction. This is Breia the Solid, another of Gorbagion’s Four Heavenly Kings. He possesses the greatest raw strength of the four kings.”

At some point, a giant had appeared behind Graze. Almost tall enough to reach the ceiling, he had grabbed Irza and lifted him up with a single hand.

“His ability is pretty simple. It makes him stronger than his opponent. If you can escape, you are welcome to, but...that doesn’t seem likely, does it?”

“Aghghghgh...h-huh?” At first Irza must have felt like he would be able to manage, but he was slowly losing his composure. “Uhh, I’m gonna get serious. Is that okay? I might end up blowing away this whole building.”

“Please, be my guest. Anyone who would be killed by such a thing would be no use to us anyway.”

“Rrrrraaaaaagh!” Irza began to scream in a strange voice.

His body began to glow, and Breia’s hand swelled up in response to his power, but that was it. In short order, the giant’s hand returned to its previous size. Breia had suppressed Irza’s power with a single hand.

“Wha? Seriously?” Irza’s face paled. He must have thought that trick would be enough to free him.

“Are we done yet?” Breia called out to Graze, clearly bored.

“Yes, it does not appear he’s capable of anything more.” Breia squeezed his hand into a fist with a squelch.

Celestina watched the events unfold. She recognized that these two were extremely powerful, but she hadn’t been able to gauge their true strength. Cold as it may have been, she decided there was probably nothing she could have done to help Irza.

“Ah, my apologies. I’ve made you watch such a silly exchange. You pass, Miss Celestina, so please go on ahead.”

If they were going to let her pass, she had no reason to fight them. Leaving the pair to kill anyone who fell below their standards would no

doubt reduce their fighting strength up ahead, but anyone who failed to meet their standards was likely not going to make much of a difference in the fight to come anyway.

Celestina went on, leaving the two demons behind.

Chapter 20 — A Dream-Like Battle between Two Perverted Women

Dai barked energetically, prompting his armor to deploy. The confusing array of parts clattered out and recombined into a larger form. The new suit of armor fired a number of cylinders, which arced through the air towards his target, a dragon. The cylinders punched through the dragon's scales and exploded.

The injured dragon cried out in pain, dropping its head to the floor. It was still alive, but only barely, and had lost all will to fight.

"Hrm...although it is a dragon entirely unrelated to me, I feel the need to ask that we leave it at that. Just watching this was painful..." Atila whined in her human form. She must have been imagining a similar fate.

They were on the highest level of the prison area. The path they were following led through a convoluted labyrinth and was blocked here and there by gates that required a Philosopher's Stone to pass through, as well as monsters that attacked without warning. Thanks to Dai's efforts, however, they were making progress easily enough.

"Dai's pretty strong, huh?" Yogiri commented.

"Why is a dog shooting missiles?!" Tomochika complained.

"I've played games with that sort of thing before."

"I mean, I know they exist, but..."

Dai trotted over to Yogiri's side with a *woof*. He answered the dog's desire to be praised by scratching his head. The dog's armor then collapsed back in on itself, stowing itself away.

"This is what the Great Sage wanted. He's probably having a great time watching us now."

"Huh? He's watching us here?" Tomochika looked around. Of course, there was no one around them, nor were there anything like cameras.

"He seems interested in us, and I'm pretty sure he's capable of it."

"Uhh...that's kind of...off-putting." She winced. "I thought that in the

worst case we could at least hide somewhere for a while, but if the Great Sage is on to us, that's probably not possible anymore."

If Tomochika were alone, she may very well have been able to live in this world alone.

Even when he hid his face, people could recognize Yogiri. Hiding somewhere probably wouldn't do him much good.

"I'm not settling for that after all we've been through. We're in this together now," Tomochika declared.

"I have no part in this incident, but...I'm starting to greatly regret getting involved with you," Atila announced. Even a higher-level being like a dragon couldn't take having the whole world as her enemy lightly.

"You don't have to come with us if you don't want to."

"That would have been nice to know before we got this far! It's too late now that I've been swept along!"

As its name suggested, the prison area was a rather gloomy place. As long as they had a Philosopher's Stone, they could keep moving forward, but their prospects for getting out weren't looking good.

"Hmm. Maybe we should have split up when we were in town?" Tomochika seemed to be a bit concerned about Atila.

"Being left alone in a human city is also an unnerving prospect!" The dragon was a part of the monster faction, so it was no surprise she'd be uneasy alone in a human settlement. Even if she wanted to go back to the monsters' base, she would need to go out into a field and enlist the help of another monster to open the gate for her. Once she weighed those options, it wasn't terribly surprising that she had let herself get pulled along by Yogiri's group.

"Anyway, let's get going." Yogiri urged them onward.

Walking around the wounded dragon, they continued down the corridor. Following Dai's lead, they came to another gate. They had already been through plenty of gates before, so they weren't especially cautious as they passed through it. As before, it took them to a staircase leading upward.

Climbing the stairs, they passed through another gate. On the other side was an all-too-familiar scene: stone corridors stretching off to the right and left. The gate they had passed through didn't exist on this side, so there was no way to backtrack.

They began exploring the new floor. Though Dai knew the general

direction of the gates, he didn't know the correct path through the labyrinth, so they still needed to do some investigating.

"The floors seem to be getting smaller. Does that mean we're getting close to the top?" Yogiri asked. As they ascended, the area they could explore was gradually shrinking. If the interior was constructed like a pyramid, as its outward appearance suggested, that was to be expected.

"We still seem to have a long way to go though," Tomochika sighed.

All we can do is pray this is not some sort of magically distorted space.

"I want to believe that at least the stairs we've been climbing aren't lying to us..."

We cannot head back, so we have no choice but to proceed regardless. And if we move too slowly, others may catch up to us.

"You really think they'll chase us?" Yogiri asked.

Of course they will. I do not know why Rick was killed, but even he may have been here searching for you.

Everyone knew that Yogiri had headed out on a quest, and they could find out which one by asking the guild staff. They didn't know if the guild staff were sworn to confidentiality or not, but it was best to assume they weren't.

"Once we get through here, we need to wait for the other Philosopher's Stones to arrive to reach the next area, so we'll probably end up meeting someone sooner or later," Yogiri said. With that in mind, reaching the last boss's area, where only seven parties maximum could find them, would be a lot better than dealing with a limitless flood of assailants.

Following Dai's guidance, they explored through the labyrinth, discovered another gate, and ascended to the next level. Occasionally, they encountered monsters, but Dai and Atila were easily able to dispatch them, leaving little for Yogiri and Tomochika to do.

"I'm starting to feel guilty about freeloading like this..." Tomochika felt a little ashamed.

"Yeah, it would be easy enough to use my power, but I really don't want to if I don't have to." Though it seemed like an odd stance to take after how much he had used his power in the past, Yogiri was afraid of becoming too quick to rely on it. If he had to defend himself, then he had no choice, but he didn't like using his power otherwise.

"Yeah, you don't have to worry about it, Takatou."

And deploying your Ruler of the Battlefield power for each and every small fry is too tiring, Mokomoko offered.

"Don't I have anything more suited to smaller encounters?"

"Ruler of the Battlefield" was a class Sion had modified in accordance with Mokomoko's request. The Sage couldn't do anything she wanted with the Gift, but for someone as experienced in handing it out as she was, it was possible to add some bias to it.

I believed being able to nullify the powers of others would allow the Dannoura style to shine, but it is quite a bit more taxing to use than I imagined. Either way, as a combat-oriented class, you will gain stats simply by leveling up.

"The name suggests something more like a rear guard or a commander, though, doesn't it?" Atila commented.

It is certainly better than something like Healer! And once she gains more levels, she may unlock more useful skills!

"Am I really looking to level up in the last dungeon of the game?!" The equipment the Great Sage gave them helped a lot considering their low level, but it could only do so much. Tomochika's level was not at all suited to this dungeon.

"Atila looked strong from the start, but Dai didn't at all, and he's doing fine. Maybe you don't need to worry about your level that much," Yogiri suggested.

"Uhh...I feel like Dai is in a whole different genre. Speaking of which, does he even have a level or class?"

"I wouldn't expect a dog to have one."

Still, he was quite strong and was making good use of his equipment. Maybe he had been given the Philosopher's Stone because he was special.

"It doesn't look like he minds, so we can just leave it to him, right?" said Yogiri.

Dai responded with a happy woof, recognizing that they were talking about him. He was wagging his tail as he walked, so Yogiri decided that must mean he was happy to be useful.

"I guess I can't really complain about leaving things to others at this point..." Yet, Tomochika seemed to realize she wasn't in this situation because she wanted to be. She was a little vexed by the ordeal, but she could put up with it for now.

As they talked, they continued walking, the labyrinth around them getting smaller and easier to navigate. At this rate they would reach the top of the pyramid without issue. While Yogiri thought optimistically about their progress, Atila suddenly grew concerned.

"I sense someone is coming up behind us."

"Now that you mention it..." Tomochika had noticed it too, but Yogiri hadn't felt anything. They were killing the monsters as they progressed through the labyrinth, so if they felt something behind them, it may have been other adventurers.

"What should we do?"

"Not much to do but keep going forward, right?"

If they continued on, they might make it out of the prison area before anyone caught up to them. They pressed forward with that hope in mind, but despite going through a number of gates, it seemed their pursuers were catching up.

At this rate, they will likely catch us before we make it out of the prison.

"What does it feel like?" Yogiri asked.

"Not too many people," Atila answered. "Just a few at most. Maybe a single party?"

"I guess we've got no choice. Let's fight them."

If they were going to be facing a constant stream of opponents, then running would have been better, but against a single party, Yogiri felt it was best to get them out of the way sooner rather than later.

The group stopped and turned to face the approaching party. After a while, they finally saw signs of something in the distance. At first, it looked like the silhouette of some large monster, but as it drew closer, he could tell that it was a small group of people. They were arranged as if participating in a cavalry battle in a high school sport's festival. Four men were working together as the horse, holding up a woman above them. As they approached, the men stopped and the woman dismounted. The men then stepped back and dropped to their knees.

The woman was basically naked. A pitiful amount of cloth was wrapped around her chest and waist, but otherwise her voluptuous, bewitching body was on full display.

"Hello! Are you Yogiri?" Her voice was sweet and kind, as if appealing to the male's base instincts.

Completely stunned, Yogiri looked at the men behind her. They all seemed like they had been charmed. They had been perfectly enslaved, looking up at their mistress with an expression of total surrender. Yogiri shook his head, immediately feeling a sense of danger from them.

"Who the heck are you?!" Tomochika said, jumping forward. She seemed to sense the same danger in the woman that Yogiri instantly had.

"Oh? You're pretty good," the woman said, eyeing Tomochika up and down.

This scene looks like a dream-like battle between two perverted women.

"Who are you calling a pervert?!" Tomochika shouted.

"Hmm...I have heard rumors of such a thing. That is a succubus's tattoo, is it not?" Atila asked.

A pattern had been tattooed on the woman's exposed lower abdomen. It looked somewhat like a heart, probably a metaphorical representation of a uterus. The tattoo did quite a bit to enhance the woman's already considerably lewd aura. She seemed like the type to be well aware of her own attractiveness and to use it to its fullest. But she had yet to do anything to them, so Yogiri was able to ask a levelheaded question.

"Can I ask you something? Parties are limited to four people, right? It looks like you guys have five."

"That's what you're worried about?!" Tomochika blurted out.

"Yeah, it's simple. It's like your puppy over there. These guys are my pets."

"That's allowed?!"

"If they agree to it, why not?" the woman answered offhandedly.

But there was a clear difference between humans and dogs. If they were treated as pets, they wouldn't be able to receive quest rewards. A dog didn't need to pay the Life Tax, but adventurers still had to pay out a steady stream of DP. In a sense, it was like a slow suicide. In other words, this woman wasn't a good person.

"What do you want?!" Tomochika flared up at the mysterious stranger.

"To save humanity, obviously. As long as Yogiri's alive, the world can't be reset, remember?"

"You think you can beat me? I thought everyone knew about my power." Though Yogiri hadn't heard the message himself, he had been told the Great Sage had informed everyone about his powers.

“Of course. You can kill anyone at will and react to killing intent, right? But that doesn’t affect me.” The woman took a step closer. That simple movement was like an alluring fragrance washing over them. “I’m not planning on killing Yogiri. I just want to get along with him. I’m saving the world with love.”

“No way! This woman is no good!” Tomochika began to panic.

Ah, this is a stratagem we have yet to see. Rather than trying to overcome him with violence, she is simply trying to seduce him.

“Mokomoko! It’s my turn to fight!”

Hm. The Ruler of the Battlefield is not so well suited to a situation like this.

“Why not?!”

It is specialized for one-on-one encounters. And once you use it, there is a considerable cooldown time before it can be activated again. It is only really useful in situations where you have a single powerful opponent that must be defeated. In other words, Mokomoko considered the men in the back to be a threat.

“So the secret technique is already useless by the second use, huh?”

“In that case, leave this woman to me!” Atila declared. She and Dai had easily wiped out the small fry they had encountered in the labyrinth. She must have thought this would be no different.

Atila raised her hands and fired her lightning, while Dai’s armor activated and launched a salvo of missiles. Against ordinary monsters, that would have annihilated them. Against an ordinary human, there wouldn’t be anything of the poor victim left. But the attacks were deflected at the last moment. A transparent dome had appeared around her, blocking the lightning and the missiles.

“What?!”

The woman and her slaves were unharmed. Not even ash from the attack lingered on the wall protecting them. One of the men had stretched his hands out. It seemed he had used his Gift to protect them.

“Apparently, he has a perfect defense ability,” the woman explained. “But he’s still a guy, so he couldn’t do much to stop *me*.”

“In that case, taste my full power!” Atila instantly returned to her dragon form. She roared, a torrent of lightning so thick as to look like a beam of light pouring from her mouth. The lightning filled the corridor with a

blinding light. The air turned to plasma, giving off enough heat to vaporize everything around them. The storm of plasma would permit nothing to survive its wrath. But the defensive barrier in front of her didn't so much as waver, the woman inside standing unperturbed within.

"What...?"

The unharmed woman hadn't so much as flinched, as if she had expected nothing less. "You know, if you do it right, I think Succubus is the strongest class. If you get some strong guys around you, you can just use them to fight off the strong women for you. And guys are a dime a dozen."

"Huh? Wait, what are we supposed to do, then?!" Tomochika looked at Yogiri in a panic. She must have thought his powers would be useless here.

Of course, since he detected no killing intent, his powers wouldn't activate automatically, and he wouldn't attack anyone who didn't attack them first. But if they were an obstacle to their progress and there was no other way, it wasn't impossible to convince him.

"If she isn't going to attack us herself, can't we just run away?" Yogiri suggested. If the woman attacked them, she would die automatically. She knew that, so she wouldn't do anything stupid.

"Oh, that's not gonna work. No guy can escape my charms. My class, Succubus, has a seduction skill that is guaranteed to work against any guy and gives me full control over them."

She took a new pose. It didn't seem to be an attack, but the air around them changed in an instant. It felt like the atmosphere had suddenly turned suspiciously indecent.

"Takatou?!"

Yogiri couldn't take his eyes off her.

Chapter 21 — There's a Limit to How Lazy You Can Be!

Yogiri was rooted to the spot by the woman's captivating behavior. Tomochika was starting to panic, having nothing but bad feelings about this. She had realized this was the best possible way to attack Yogiri. It wasn't even really an attack, just an appeal to his human instincts as a guy. As a girl, she didn't know what it took to fight against those Succubus-induced urges, but she knew that stories regarding a single night's mistake or giving in to temptation abounded in their world.

B-But there's no way Takatou would be so easily seduced... she thought. "Wait!" She interrupted her own inner voice. "This guy stuck with me this whole time because of my boobs, right?!"

In other words, there was no guarantee that a woman with a larger chest, or who was more appealing in general, wouldn't be able to draw him away. She couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't give in.

This is bad! Mokomoko interjected. *Our only choice is to have you start dancing too!*

"Be serious! What are we going to do?!"

The only thing I can think of is for you to start stripping!

"This guardian spirit is totally useless!"

The succubus chuckled. "Don't you think you'd have a lot more fun with me than a girl like that?" She tried to tempt Yogiri, her voice low and sultry enough that it even took Tomochika by surprise.

“I bet she doesn’t do anything for you, does she?” the succubus continued. “You can do whatever you like with me. I’ll fulfill your every desire.”

“Okay! Let’s get Takatou back to his senses!” With her defensive barrier, there was nothing they could do to the succubus. Instead, Tomochika turned to Yogiri at her side, lifting a hand to hopefully knock some sense into him. But before she could strike, Mokomoko shouted.

Stop! If he is already under that woman’s control, you will die!

“But...” At the prospect of having Yogiri taken away from her, Tomochika couldn’t stand by and do nothing. “Sorry, Takatou!”

“Uh, if you hit me like that, I’m pretty sure I’ll die,” Yogiri said, his face paling as she moved to hit him.

“Huh?”

“What are you all worked up about?” he asked.

“But...but...you were just charmed by that weirdo, so...”

“No, I wasn’t. I’ve been sane this whole time.”

The succubus collapsed.

“Excuse me?” Tomochika was in shock. She had no idea why the succubus would have died at this point. The men behind her suddenly returned to their senses, fleeing in a panic. They were likely still confused, but at least recognized that they were in immediate danger.

“She probably tried to brainwash me or something. But doing something to someone that robs them of their free will sounds like an attack to me.” His power must have activated automatically to fight back. But Tomochika never would have expected seduction to count as an attack.

“What are you, invincible?! Even mental attacks don’t work on you?!” Tomochika blurted out.

“If they did, I would have been locked away somewhere a long time ago.”

“I-I guess...”

If Yogiri’s existence became known, there were any number of people who would want to use him to their own ends. It wouldn’t be strange for those kinds of people to have methods to manipulate someone’s mind.

And yet, you seemed quite fascinated with that woman, Mokomoko interjected.

“Well...I kind of got distracted when she started acting like that in that

outfit.”

“‘Distracted,’ huh?” Tomochika sighed.

◇◇◇

Passing through another gate, they came upon a spiral staircase. Looking up, they could see light pouring in through a hole in the ceiling. It was clearly different from the previous areas, so it seemed the previous gate had been the last one. Climbing up the stairs and through the hole, they came upon a place with an open stone floor. Though it had taken some time, they had finally made it out of the pyramid.

“So? Now what?” Yogiri asked.

The clouds were surprisingly close overhead, but not close enough that they could reach them. They still couldn’t see what the clouds were hiding either.

“Looks like there’s something over there,” Tomochika said, pointing. Though the top of the pyramid should have been the smallest floor, it was still a hundred meters across. They were standing near one of the corners, but there was something in the center, a small round structure with a domed roof that somewhat looked like a shrine. With nothing else catching their eye, that must have been where they were supposed to go next.

“If it’s a castle in the sky, shouldn’t you be able to fly there, Atila?”

She immediately refused. “No way! Do you not remember what happened last time?!”

“I guess they do have a pretty sloppy way of dealing with players who go off the rails,” Yogiri admitted. It would be a problem if they were knocked off the pyramid again, so they decided to take the straightforward approach of heading to the shrine.

It appears there are a number of other entrances to this floor.

“There’s no way we’re supposed to go into one of those, right?” Tomochika asked.

“I guess there’s a chance the shrine is locked and we’ll have to go back into the prison to find a key,” Yogiri said.

“Weren’t those gates only one-way though?!” Atila’s face filled with despair. She must have realized that if they needed something from inside, they’d have to start the climb from the bottom again.

“That would make this a terrible game,” Tomochika spat.

As their short walk brought them to the front of the shrine, Yogiri was relieved to see the entrance was open. The outside of the shrine was lined with white pillars, while the interior was made up of a small circular room. Heading inside, they found it was a rather tight fit. It felt like it would be full with only five people in it. As they stepped in, Yogiri’s attention was immediately caught by the man at the center. It was the Sage Van, the man who had created Cavern Quest, sitting on a pedestal that looked like an altar.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Van replied, clearly unhappy.

“What do you mean ‘nothing’?” Tomochika said. “You’re here for a reason, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I’m in a bad mood. Could you leave me alone?”

“Okay, let’s leave him.”

“Hold on, this guy is an enemy, isn’t he?!” Tomochika cried.

“Maybe, but if he doesn’t do anything to us, we can’t do anything to him either.” Van was sulking for some reason or other, so Yogiri decided to ignore him. Looking around the room, he saw seven weapons hanging on the walls. A sword, a bow, a staff, a spear, a knife, an axe, and a shield were all on display. The only other thing in the room appeared to be the circular altar in the center, but since Van was sitting on it, they couldn’t inspect it very closely.

“We need seven Philosopher’s Stones to proceed, and there are seven weapons. That’s probably connected, right?” Tomochika mused.

“Though there are fewer stones than that now,” Yogiri pointed out.

“No, there aren’t,” Van muttered.

“But that Shirou guy came and told us that. Now that I think about it, he also said you were sulking. Are you still upset about it?”

The Philosopher’s Stones had been disappearing. That would force the game to lock up, so instead it had been decided that the last person to possess the stones before they disappeared would gain the right to face Lasbo. Anyone who killed those people could steal that right from them. That’s the situation Shirou had explained to them.

“There’s more now,” Van said.

“Huh?”

“If the stones were just disappearing, I could have managed it! But now the number of stones is growing! It’s too weird!”

“Why are you getting mad at us?!”

They had no idea what kind of person Van was, but he hadn’t seemed like the type to explode this way, so Yogiri was surprised by the outburst.

“The number of stones is growing? Does that mean Luu is turning back into Philosopher’s Stones?”

“Not at all,” Van said. “If that was the case, there wouldn’t be more than a hundred of them right now.”

“How on earth did that happen?” Yogiri asked, totally confused. Before the world had been reset, they had gone through quite a bit of hardship to gather a small number of stones. It was absurd to think there were now over a hundred of them.

“I don’t know either. I just noticed it happened suddenly.”

“So what’s the situation with the Lasbo quest, then?”

“There’s no Lasbo.”

“Seriously, what is your deal right now?” Everything Van said seemed to be an earth-shattering revelation, leaving Yogiri at a loss.

“The Lasbo fight was supposed to be a fight to the death between seven parties. So the last two parties alive would see each other as the last boss.”

“That sounds like a huge spoiler!” Tomochika said. “Why are you telling us that now?!”

“Who cares anymore? Things are so messed up, nothing matters at this point.” Van seemed to be sinking into despair. “Especially after what gramps did. Why is he getting so involved? No one even cares about Cavern Quest anymore. They’re all just trying to kill *you* now.” Van had put his heart into creating and running Cavern Quest. It was hard to complain in his position, even as the Great Sage ruined it. There wasn’t much for him to do now but sulk.

“That’s kind of a problem for me too, though,” Yogiri said.

“Go ahead. Take whatever one you want,” Van said, pointing to the weapons on the wall.

“What are these? They look kind of important.”

“They’re Lasbo’s weapons. You were supposed to use them in the last fight to the death. Actually, why don’t you just take all of them?”

“Huh? Don’t you feel this is getting kind of sloppy?” Tomochika asked.

“You think so? At this point, you guys are like the last boss, so this sounds more fitting to me. There wouldn’t have been enough for everyone anyway. I feel like it doesn’t matter who has them at this point.”

“Is there a limit on how unmotivated you can be?!” cried Tomochika.

“Just so we’re clear, what’s the final condition for the game now?” Yogiri asked.

“You beat the game when you have all the Philosopher’s Stones or the rights they gave you when they disappeared. Once they’re all together and you’re the last party left, you win. I thought it would be a minimum of two parties at the very least, but looks like it’s now over a hundred.”

“That...sounds like a pain.” Even imagining the work ahead left Yogiri sighing.

Chapter 22 — Interlude: I Believe It's Reasonable to Assume My Master's Wishes Did Have an Influence on It

In Cavern Quest, there was a function to allow players to switch channels. It was part of the game's system, but actually realizing it existed was surprisingly challenging.

First of all, playing the game normally, you would never realize there were multiple starting towns with different channel numbers. Each city had been provided with sufficient facilities and staff, and the city only really existed to connect the players to the field maps, so there wasn't much to suggest there was more than one.

However, the existence of other channels was only trivial to lower-level players—those struggling to survive each day. Stronger players would find the quests they were taking to be more and more difficult to complete as a single party. To continue progressing, they would need to join forces with other parties of powerful players, but that wasn't always possible in a single town. So when a player began taking higher-level quests, they were given new information. It included knowledge of how to travel between channels and communicate between them.

But for Shigeto Mitadera, getting that kind of information was easy. When he had joined Cavern Quest, he had been given the class of Master Oracle like before. It gave him the ability to create a book that told him how to achieve his goals as if it were a strategy guide for a video game. So inside of Cavern Quest, which was almost a video game itself, getting information on how best to proceed was easy for him.

"It didn't really bother me at first, but it's interesting that you started as a human this time." Shigeto was facing a young girl across the table from him in the adventurer's guild's bar. Though he was wearing armor he had obtained in the game, she didn't seem dressed for combat at all.

“I have no desire to be a mere book anymore.” Her name was Navi. Back in what Sion called ‘part one,’ Shigeto had been pressed into a corner and his power had been awakened, transforming his power from that of a book into a girl.

“But didn’t Cavern Quest reset my level of the Gift to 1? Isn’t it strange for you to be here?”

“Not at all. I also retained my memories of the previous world, and my experience of having obtained this form. It is more natural for me to appear in this form now.”

“Speaking of levels, what happens if I level you up?” Shigeto asked, the thought occurring to him what felt like far later than it should have. His class gave him the ability to obtain information about achieving his goals, but it didn’t feel like leveling it up would improve the information he’d obtain.

“The book becomes harder.”

“What? What do you mean?”

Navi pulled out a thick book and placed it on the table. “It gets more solid. The attack power goes up.”

“Huh? It’s a weapon?”

“There are games like that, where scholars use books as weapons.”

“I mean, sure, but... So, the prophecy ability isn’t affected by level at all?”

“No. That is why I’ve been able to get this much information for you.”

Shigeto had leveled up somewhat within Cavern Quest, but he was still a beginner, far from being a veteran.

“You can actually fight with that?”

“I suppose if I got close enough to hit them with it, it would do some amount of damage.”

“So no, then.”

Navi hadn’t done much of anything during their quests. The quests he had been taking hadn’t put much pressure on Shigeto yet, so there was no need for Navi, who he assumed had no fighting ability, to get involved.

“What are you expecting of a frail little girl like me?”

“There was that one time you dragged me across the city. And you stomped my face in once too.” Though she appeared to be a young girl, she still packed considerable power.

“Do you think they’ll come?” Shigeto asked.

“I wonder. It seems there isn’t much to talk about at this point.”

“Even I know that we won’t all get along at this point. But I’m curious about Takatou. I want to know what everyone thinks of him.”

The majority of the class had likely joined Cavern Quest, but Shigeto had yet to meet anyone he recognized in the city. If they were all just doing their own thing, that was fine, but recently the Great Sage had made information about Yogiri public. He’d told them the world had been reset, said that those Yogiri killed hadn’t come back, and explained exactly who those people were. Finally, he’d told them that if they killed Yogiri, everyone Yogiri had killed would be brought back to life. A number of their classmates had died, so Shigeto was interested to some degree. But there was a limit to what he could accomplish by thinking on his own. So he had contacted his classmates.

That would normally be impossible within the system of Cavern Quest, but with Shigeto’s power—Navi’s power—it was possible. It had taught him how to find players in other cities and communicate with them. Finding all of his classmates, he’d sent a message through the adventurer’s guild to them. The staff should have delivered his messages. The message said that he wanted to talk about Yogiri, and included his channel number, an explanation of how to switch channels, and a meeting time.

He figured about half of the class wouldn’t show up. It cost a significant amount of DP to travel between channels. In other words, if you weren’t seriously trying to progress through the game, it would be difficult to afford. There was also the issue that any discussion about Yogiri would be futile. That was why Shigeto didn’t go to meet his classmates himself. He didn’t have the DP to switch channels that many times, and even if he did, they might not be interested in talking with him anyway.

So he had decided to send the message and wait. Some might consider that selfish on his part, but sending the message had cost DP in and of itself, so he had already paid quite a price to get this meeting together.

“What do you intend to do about him?” Navi asked.

“Not a lot I can do. He’s unstoppable, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Yogiri Takatou is an absolutely insurmountable obstacle if he appears in your path, but if you don’t involve yourself with him, he is not a threat.”

“Isn’t a strategy guide supposed to have secret strategies for beating otherwise impossible opponents?”

“How should I put this? He isn’t an obstacle to be conquered, but rather to be avoided. Think of him like a zone of lava, where falling in means certain death. Ah, that’s just an example though. It’s not like there are some sort of ice boots you can use to avoid dying.”

“I see. Well, if we stay away from him, there’s no problem. But there’s always a chance he comes for us. So your example isn’t that good, is it?”

“Shut up. As long as you understand, the example is fine.”

Seeing Navi start to pout, Shigeto decided to leave it at that.

“So you’re a lolicon, Mitadera?”

Turning to the newcomer, he saw a beautiful girl standing in front of him. She was wearing something that could hardly be called ordinary clothing, closer to something one would expect from an idol at a live show. She was Sora Akino, a girl who had actually been an idol before coming to this world.

“That’s... This is just my power... I’m not a lolicon...” Feeling attacked, Shigeto became flustered.

“My name is Navi. I had no choice in my form, so I believe it’s reasonable to assume my master’s wishes did have an influence on it.”

“Please, stop...”

“Either way, we’re not dating, so your tastes are no concern of mine.” As she spoke, Sora sat down at the table. “Ten minutes until we start, huh? There are a lot fewer people here than I expected.” There was no difference between the flow of time in Cavern Quest and the surface world. Anyone who had the Gift installed could see a clock in the Gift’s interface. “Maybe moving between channels was too much of a hurdle? I would expect some people to show up just to see their classmates.”

“Are you sure? Well...I guess if they were thrown in here alone,” Shigeto said.

“They may have cute little companions like you do,” Sora said, “so maybe they aren’t that lonely at all.”

“I guess based on your outfit that you got the Idol class again?” Ignoring her attempts at banter, Shigeto tried to push the conversation forward.

“Yes, I didn’t have any other good ideas. I’m pretty familiar with this class’s abilities too.” Back when they’d first arrived in this world before the

reset, Shigeto had left the class almost immediately, so he didn't know the details about Sora's powers. But if she had gathered enough DP to move between channels, she must have been reasonably strong.

"So you were with Harufuji, then?"

"Yes. She made my clothes for me again." Runa Harufuji had had the class of Dressmaker before the reset, so it seemed she'd also kept the same class as before. It allowed her to make any sort of clothing she wished as long as she had material to work with.

"I didn't think many people would come, but I was expecting more than this." Five minutes before the designated time, Haruto Ootori appeared. "I thought at least Yazaki would be here."

Suguru Yazaki had had the class of General and had taken control of the class right after they'd arrived in this world. If he had the same class now, he should have been reasonably strong, so it was hard to think he was having difficulty with the game, but they didn't know anything about him for sure. The player search function in Cavern Quest didn't provide any information about the players concerning their Gift or other non-game information.

"I figured if too many people showed up, we'd move somewhere else," Shigeto said, "but if this is all that's coming, I guess this place is fine."

Haruto sat down at the table. The designated time passed with no other classmates appearing. Shigeto was disappointed that Akinobu Marufuji and Rei Kushima, his companions from before the reset, hadn't come, but maybe that was to be expected. There was a huge difference in their state of mind before the reset and after it. Before the reset, the installation of the Gift had altered their personalities to be more aggressive and assertive. He had no idea if they would still be interested in dealing with Shigeto now.

"To start off, I have no intention of dealing with Takatou anymore," Haruto said.

"So why are you here, then?" Shigeto sighed.

"Curiosity, I guess. One of our classmates turned out to be a mass murderer. I was curious how everyone would react to that."

"Well, that's too bad. It looks like the sample will be too small to be useful," Navi said, seeming not the least bit sympathetic.

"Did you have some run-in with Takatou before, Ootori?" Sora asked.

"Sage Sion tasked me with killing him before, so I did what I could

against him. That experience was enough to teach me that no one can beat him. Nothing good can come from dealing with him further." Haruto sounded like he was fed up with it all, but it sounded genuine to Shigeto.

"I called everyone here because I wanted to ask what people thought about the current situation," Shigeto said. "I have no delusions about us being able to fight him."

"But he still killed many of our classmates. We can't just ignore that," Sora interjected.

"That's...true. It's certainly different than thinking he killed some people we didn't know in a place we've never been."

"How many ended up dying because of him?"

"Ryousuke Higashida, Yoshiaki Fukuhara, Yuuki Tachibana, Yukimasa Aihara, Romiko Jougasaki, and Ayaka Shinozaki. Six in all," Navi said.

"I'm surprised you remember them all. Did you get the message from the Great Sage too?"

"No, but I can retrieve it as useful information for making forward progress. That is likely because the Great Sage made the names of everyone Yogiri Takatou killed public knowledge."

"Six people... The number isn't really important, but the fact he killed them is still a problem," Sora said. "If there's a chance of bringing those six back to life, we can't just do nothing."

"Just so you know, there actually is no way you can beat him." Haruto's class was Consultant, giving him a similar power to Shigeto's Master Oracle. He had the power to collect information and put it together into a plan of action. It seemed his power had drawn the same conclusion as Shigeto's own.

"Yeah. Takatou isn't someone we can even consider beating. He's like an obstacle that's harmless as long as we avoid it. There's nothing we can do but leave him be." Shigeto wasn't particularly interested in bringing those six back to life. As classmates, he knew their names and faces, but that was as far as their relationships went. He had no reason to risk his life to fight for them.

"Don't you think it's better to say beating him isn't necessary?"

"Oh?" Haruto turned to Sora, intrigued.

"He took six lives from our class. The fact that he's able to keep living as if nothing happened means he must not understand the weight of his

actions. In that case, we just need to teach him. If he comes to understand the value of human life, he may regret what he's done. If he truly understands, he may make an effort to bring those six back to life himself. Even if, for example, that means discarding his own life."

"I see... I hadn't thought of that," Haruto said. "How do you kill someone who's invincible? Getting them to kill themselves is a pretty simple solution. But have you ever had a normal conversation with Takatou before?"

"Now that you mention it, I suppose not," Sora admitted.

"If you talk to him even briefly, you'll get it. He's not a proper human being. After all, he killed six percent of this world's entire population and didn't feel the least bit of guilt."

Shigeto felt the same way. He didn't see Yogiri as someone who would agonize over the deaths he had caused. He felt it was better to characterize him as a natural disaster that happened to look like a human being.

"I see," Sora said. "But don't you think that could just be your own preconception? Are you sure you just haven't given up on understanding him?"

"Feel free to try and convince him. I'm certainly not going to stop you."

"Okay. Everything ends when you give up on communication. I believe that as human beings, we can come to understand each other through dialogue."

Taking Sora's words as complete nonsense, Shigeto looked to Navi. She was deep in thought. At the very least, it didn't seem she could deny Sora's conjecture outright.

Truly believing in what she'd said, Sora wore a smile brimming with confidence.

MY INSTANT DEATH ABILITY IS SO OVERPOWERED, NO ONE IN THIS OTHER WORLD STANDS A CHANCE AGAINST ME!

Side Story

The Beginning

The village had no name. Having virtually no contact with the outside world, those who lived within it had no need for one, so those outside who knew of it could only refer to it as “the village.” Of course, it rarely ever came up in conversation, as its existence remained concealed.

It was a taboo place—none knew why it existed. The “powers that be” avoided sharing any information about it. Not only would getting involved with the village threaten the foundation of their own authority, but, albeit in an incomplete way, they understood that it would put the entire world in jeopardy. All they had to do was...nothing at all. They only had to suppress the childish instinct to exert control over everything, and pretend there was nothing there. That was the best course of action.

But what about the people who lived in that village and protected it? At first glance, they might appear to fully understand the taboo under their care, acting as guardians of the world.

However, in the end, those who kept careful watch over *it* since ages long past still had no idea what it really was.

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Everyone in the village was involved. Every single one of them bore responsibility. Even something as simple as bringing it food was a job that they had to take turns carrying out, regardless of their position in the village. The system was set up to work even if someone were to suddenly die.

Rikou’s first time encountering it was when he was ten years old. Compared to the others in the village, his family held a leadership position. He found it in a room of the mansion. It was Rikou’s first time being given a job related to it. All he had to do was bring the tray of food to its room and then leave, but he was still nervous.

It felt totally empty. He had no idea what it was thinking. It had long

hair, wore a white kimono, and stood aimlessly in the middle of a dark room, even during the day.

Rikou didn't know what it was. It looked like a person, but he couldn't tell whether it was a man or a woman, or even how old it was. It was obviously not a child, but it somehow looked both young and elderly at once. In the end, he could get nothing but vague impressions from it.

The adults seemed terrified of it, but Rikou didn't understand why. Though it was a bit unnerving, and maybe even gross, there was nothing scary about it. It was actually harmless. It had no interest in what happened outside, content with just being alive. But when Rikou brought the tray in, it lifted its gaze to look at him. As one might expect, it had taken an interest in someone coming so close to it.

"Please get along with him," it said, its voice hoarse and gravelly from disuse.

Now that it had spoken, Rikou could tell it was a woman. Surprised that it had suddenly spoken, he hurriedly put down the tray and fled the room. It would be a number of years before he understood what those words meant.

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It led a peaceful life, entirely lacking in stimulation, until one day it suddenly vanished. Apparently, it had moved into another building, one very different from the others in the village. Rikou had been told that entering the building was forbidden, so he asked what it was. His parents only told him that if he went there, he would die. They didn't tell him *not* to go. It was as if they didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to go there at the cost of their own life. Rikou certainly wasn't.

A few years passed, and the old room in the mansion was used once again. This time there was a small child there. The woman Rikou had met before was never seen again. Most likely, the child was hers and she had died. There was something about the child that reminded Rikou of her. It seemed disconnected from the outside world in the same way, and just like its mother, it never spoke. That said, as expected of a child, it still showed affection to those who took care of it and even responded to toys.

No one ever spoke the child's name. It probably didn't have one. They called it Lord Okakushi, but its mother had been called the same thing, so it

was probably more of a title. Rikou didn't feel anything was odd about the child. He didn't see any reason to be afraid of it. It looked like any other stupid, boring kid. That was his impression just from seeing it, but that was also around the time Rikou was starting to develop a sense of pride in his family's station.

The people who lived in this village weren't normal. There were supernatural beings in this world and supernatural powers. There were youkai and monsters, curses and other spiritual forces. The people who lived here were skilled in those spiritual powers.

As Rikou grew, he became aware of these powers and learned to control them. As he grew stronger, he was able to understand how strong others were as well. He learned that no run-of-the-mill youkai could stand against them and just how much his own people were feared.

That naturally led him to question what the purpose of his village was. Every person who lived there wielded supernatural powers, any one of them capable of facing off against an army on their own. But these super-powered people all hid in this remote village, taking care of some powerless child. He didn't understand.

Even among this village of powerful people, Rikou was especially blessed with strength. As he grew, so did his power, until none in the village could match him. It wasn't long before he started looking down on his fellow villagers just as much as he did Lord Okakushi.

Most of the villagers didn't even know what they were doing there, only carrying out the instructions left by their ancestors. They questioned nothing, repeating the same actions over and over. Their ancestors had come from foreign lands and had spent hundreds, thousands of years repeating the same stupid lives.

Something was wrong with this place. Rotting here for no reason had to be wrong. Rikou's dissatisfaction grew. If that child was being protected by so many powerful people, it must have been special somehow. Just what was Lord Okakushi? What were his people doing here? Rikou asked the elders of the village, but they gave him no proper answer.

This was their mission since ancient times. Failure meant the end of the world. They just repeated the same inane prattle as always. There was no way answers like that would satisfy him. With their power, they should have had the world under their thumb. And yet, they hid in the wilderness,

taking care of some stupid kid.

The village had sunken into stagnation. Nothing ever changed, and no one ever tried to change it. He couldn't expect anything from the others, so he had no choice but to abandon them. At the age of fifteen, Rikou decided to leave the village behind.

The village didn't allow anyone to leave, but that wouldn't be much of an obstacle to him. Though they kept watch to stop anyone leaving, they couldn't keep watch everywhere at every waking moment. Finding a chance to slip out unnoticed wouldn't be that difficult.

But Rikou made no effort to do so. His pride wouldn't allow him to sneak away like that. Late at night, he headed to a room in his house, the room where that dumb kid the village was protecting lived.

"If you just wanted to leave, we wouldn't have stopped you."

His father was standing in front of the door to the child's room. He acted like he knew exactly what was about to happen. Now that Rikou was here, there was nothing that could be done to avoid it.

They both moved at the same time. Their power erupted, creating a storm that tore apart the corridor around them. The paper sliding door behind them was blown away, revealing the boy sleeping behind it. Seeing him finally wake up to the commotion, Rikou was reminded how stupid that child was.

Their fight had left a scratch across Rikou's cheek. In exchange, he had taken off his father's left arm. Rikou only had to protect himself, while his father also had to worry about the child behind him. The difference in their positions was evident.

Others from the village began to arrive. There was no way they would fail to notice something happening here. Each and every last one of them would give their lives to protect the boy's life.

"Is taking my arm rather than killing me your idea of compassion?" the father asked, standing alone across from his son.

Whatever emotion this sparked in him was of no concern to Rikou. He'd known this would happen if he came for the boy. He had come prepared to fight the entire village. His father's pathetic resolve was nothing to him.

The villagers didn't hesitate to attack Rikou, who struck them down. The only ones who offered any real resistance were his own family members. Most were only nameless grunts. Before he knew it, Rikou's

rampage had ended with only him and the boy left alive.

Of course, Rikou wasn't totally unharmed. He had small wounds all over and had likely broken a few bones. But they were all injuries that would heal with time. The boy was covered in blood, splashed on him by his slain defenders. Their desperate defense had kept him unharmed so far.

"I didn't know you could make a face like that."

Though the boy showed little emotion, the tragedy unfolding around him had managed to elicit a response. His face had paled, and his eyes were open wide with shock. Rikou lifted a hand towards the boy. There were no more people to act as his shield. At this point, the boy would have to protect himself, but he did nothing. Though disappointed, Rikou wasn't surprised. In the end, the boy had no power at all. The people of the village had protected him with a religious fervor, but in the end he was nothing.

His life or death meant nothing to Rikou anymore. However, he also felt like there was value in finishing what he started. Rikou created countless blades of wind, firing them towards the boy. The powerless child would be torn to shreds. It wasn't even a fight, just cleaning up after himself. And yet the boy was unharmed, while Rikou was slashed to pieces.

"Huh?"

Beheaded, his arms dismembered, his torso split in two, Rikou fell to the ground. He should have died instantly. And yet, despite the fact he shouldn't even have been able to think, the head rolling across the straw mats was still conscious. He saw the hem of a kimono. Someone was standing in front of the boy.

"We were going to leave this to the humans since he's a human too, but you can't even take your own attack slapped back at you?" He heard a woman sigh. There shouldn't have been anyone around him, but she had suddenly appeared and reflected Rikou's attack. "Hey, wait, where are you going?! Ah, jeez... Nothing I can do about him. This is your fault!"

The woman stomped a bare foot onto Rikou's head, crushing it. That was the last sensation he felt while alive.

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On the way home from middle school, Yogiri Takatou was walking alone. A half-hearted conclusion had brought him to this state. If he didn't

want to cause problems for anyone, living alone underground might be best. But what was the point of a life like that? Humans were social creatures. They couldn't live without others. If he wanted to be human, he needed at least some degree of interaction with people. So he went to school and studied. He kept his interactions with his classmates to a minimum, avoiding contact with them as much as possible.

Of course, that didn't make any difference to the people targeting him. No matter how little he interacted with them, someone might take his classmates hostage to try and get the upper hand over him. In order to gain some measure of freedom for himself, he had threatened the powerful people and organizations that had their eyes on him under the pretense of negotiation. He had shown off his power, letting them know what fate awaited them if they tried to harm him or those close to him. As a result, those organizations had stopped making overt moves against him. They may have been observing him from a distance, but as long as they didn't try to mess with him, he was fine with that.

Of course, that wasn't enough to avoid all trouble. There were plenty of underground organizations, superhumans, and supernatural threats in the world that would appear when they heard rumors about him. However, these beings were tiny in comparison to the global organizations he had already dealt with, so none of them were especially concerning. Yogiri didn't even have to deal with them himself. A protective bodyguard was set up around him, dealing with any such attackers, all without Yogiri ever knowing about them.

At present, his power was sealed away. He couldn't actively choose to use his power, nor would it automatically activate. Not knowing what would happen if someone were to try and kill him in this state, the Institute assumed the worst. With Yogiri no longer able to protect himself, they had become even more desperate to protect him. Thanks to their efforts, he had been able to live a relatively peaceful life recently. He wanted nothing more than for his life to continue in that way.

But on his way home, a bloody monkey jumped out in front of him, forcing him to come to a stop. It looked like a Japanese macaque but significantly larger and more muscular. When Yogiri met its gaze, it bared its teeth, threatening him.

Yogiri stopped to think for a moment. Being attacked by a wild animal

was unfortunate but natural. He couldn't be bothered to release his seal every time something like this happened, and it would be normal enough for him to die in such a situation. But a giant monkey attacking the area around his house was strange, to the point where it may have been planned by somebody. He couldn't just stand by and let that happen.

As he puzzled over how to deal with the monkey, someone leaped out from the front yard of a nearby house. It was a small boy, wearing an elementary school backpack. He was already injured and had a gleaming Japanese sword in hand. The cold, naked blade was clearly not a toy.

"That looks illegal..." Yogiri murmured without thinking.

"Now's not the time for that!" the boy shouted, leaping towards the monkey. He swung his sword, the blade passing over the monkey's head. It looked as if he had missed, but for some reason, the monkey dropped to the ground. The boy immediately picked up its body.

"Are you okay?"

"Tch!" It looked too large for the young boy to carry, but he just clicked his tongue in frustration at Yogiri before leaping over a nearby wall and disappearing from sight.

"What was that all about?" Being treated so rudely after being genuinely concerned about the boy, Yogiri felt a little hurt.

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The Ninomiya family was responsible for protecting Yogiri. Of course, that included not only the times he was home, but also when he was at school and on his way to and from either. Their pride was in their ability to fulfill their mission, all without the target of their protection being aware of it. From that perspective, Ryouta Ninomiya's actions today had been terrible.

In the living room of the Ninomiya residence, Ryouta's two older siblings, Ryousuke and Ryouko, were lecturing him. Their parents and grandparents were in the middle of guarding Yogiri, so they weren't present.

"It's a pain in the ass. Wouldn't it be easier to just protect him openly?" The highest priority was the safety of their charge. Ryouta felt that focusing on keeping themselves hidden was unnecessarily complicating the situation.

“The reason they tasked us with this mission was because we could do it stealthily,” his sister Ryouko said at his side. The Ninomiya household was a family of ninja. Their people had integrated themselves into the city as ordinary people. They had been requested to use those resources to protect Yogiri without anyone knowing.

“You’re already in the same class as him, aren’t you? That’s no different than him seeing me.”

“I don’t think he’s taken notice of me. Never mind a bodyguard, I doubt he even notices me as a classmate.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Even being biased against her as her brother, Ryouta could tell his sister was reasonably attractive. Even an elementary school student like him couldn’t imagine a middle school boy failing to take an interest in her.

“It makes things an awful lot easier, actually,” she replied.

People occasionally targeted Yogiri at school. Ryouko’s job was to eliminate them without anyone knowing. Of course, no middle school girl could handle such a task alone, so the Ninomiya family also had agents among the school’s faculty.

Ryouta attended an elementary school in the same area, his primary job being guarding Yogiri on his way to and from school. The entire Ninomiya family had invested itself in this great project, even to the point of hiding among the elementary school children to keep an eye on Yogiri.

“Anyway. Don’t let him see you again.” Ryousuke brought the conversation to a close. He wasn’t especially interested in condemning his little brother for doing his job. “As much as possible, at least.”

“So, what exactly was that monkey?” Ryouko asked.

“It was being controlled by some kind of evil spirit. Once I cut the spirit down, the monkey stopped moving too.” It had been something like a marionette. Something had been hovering over the monkey’s head, controlling it. “The monkey itself was already dead. I saw a number of them around the area.”

Ryouta wasn’t the only one to have fought those things. A considerable effort had been put into taking down the other corpse puppets—not all of them monkeys—without the public knowing. Of course, the other agents didn’t let Yogiri see what was happening.

“There’s a high chance they’re targeting our charge. We’ll be doubling

his guard from now on," Ryousuke announced.

"You think those things'll be back?" Ryouta slumped, remembering his fight that day. Maybe because it was already dead, the monkey had been extremely reckless in its attacks.

"It doesn't look like they have any intention of hiding themselves, so they may attack you without regard for their surroundings. Be careful."

"Yeah, easy for you to say."

Ryouta was thinking that this really wasn't a situation that could realistically be resolved stealthily, when suddenly the doorbell rang. As it was around dinnertime, they weren't expecting any visitors. Ryouta stood up, immediately suspicious. As he headed to the front door, the unnatural presence he felt there made him stop. He instinctively knew that he shouldn't open the door.

"O..."

"OOOOOOO..."

"OKAKAKAKA..."

"KAKUSHISHISHISHISHI..."

"LORD OKAKUSHI..."

"HERE? HERE? HERE? NOT HERE?"

"WHEREWHEREWHEREWHERE?"

The door rattled, shaken fiercely by whoever was on the other side.

"Damn it, why'd they come here?!"

It was a type of phantom. It wasn't the kind of opponent Ryouta could handle barehanded. He ran back to the living room to get his spirit blade, where he found his brother collapsed on the ground. Ryouko had her own sword drawn, watching her surroundings.

"What's going on?! I thought phantoms couldn't get in here!" Just like the creatures outside couldn't enter through the front door, phantoms shouldn't have been able to enter the Ninomiya residence without being invited in.

"He just picked up the phone..." Ryouko answered. Ryousuke's head was bleeding.

"WHERE? LORD OKAKUSHI, WHEEERE?"

"HERE? HEY, HERE?"

Ryouta could hear voices coming from his brother's smartphone. Ryouta ran to the couch where his weapon lay and immediately drew it from its

sheath.

“They came in through the phone?!”

“Probably. But why now? Why here?”

Shadows suddenly appeared in the room. First one, then two, then more. Ryouko hurled a kunai at the phone, smashing it and cutting off the voices. Ryouta slashed at one of the nearby shadows. He felt no physical resistance from it, but he could tell his attack had worked. The shadow split and began to dissipate. Apparently, Ryouta could take them on himself.

Just as he was starting to feel relief, the house phone began to ring. The TV turned itself on, voices coming in through the white noise. The lights started to blink on and off, and he could hear the sound of the front door opening. The spiritual protections for their house had been breached.

“Run!” Ryouko leaped out of the window into the yard. Ryouta hurried to follow but immediately regretted it. A nauseating malice filled the air outside the house. The inside of the house was far, far safer.

Ryouko was floating in the air. A shadow had caught her, constricting around her. It was a difficult sight for Ryouta to believe. Even if spirits could possess people or animals and control them, he had never heard of them being able to interact physically like this.

“WHERE?”
“LORD OKAKUSHI.”
“YOU?”
“ARE YOU LORD OKAKUSHI?”

Darkness had fallen over the area around them. Malice and hatred filled the air. Ryouta was shaking with fear. He couldn’t think of a single way to fight back, blinded by despair. Shadows writhed within his own body, the curse already eating its way into his gut. There was no more escape for him.

“I-I know! I know where he is! So let my sister go!” Throwing away his pride as a ninja, Ryouta begged the creatures for mercy.

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After dying, Rikou became a vengeful ghost. Perhaps due to his unusually high spiritual strength, he retained the majority of his memories. Of course, he wasn’t exactly the same as before. He was now ruled by an uncontrollable hatred. His grudge against the boy was all-consuming.

The boy hadn’t killed him. His killer had been someone else, but that didn’t matter. With his memories of the time around his death so vague, he chose to believe that the boy was responsible for everything, and nothing would convince him otherwise.

Though he had become even more powerful than he had been in life, that didn’t mean he could carry out his revenge immediately. When he had returned to consciousness, he didn’t know how much time had passed or where he was. There was no sign of the boy nearby, and he had no idea where he had gone. No matter how much power Rikou had obtained, if he didn’t know where the aim of his revenge had gone, there was nothing he could do.

So he spread himself out across the entire world. If that boy was still alive somewhere, someone like Rikou’s family would be protecting him. So, if he could find places where his hatred was regularly being purged, those became more likely hiding spots for the boy.

Though maddened by his lust for revenge, he retained the rationality to develop and carry out his plan.

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“Do you think there’s a reason I’m so unpopular?” Those were the first words out of Asaka’s mouth when she made it home that night.

“Maybe it’s just hard to see what’s great about you?” Yogiri gave a half-hearted answer, not looking up from his video games.

“And what *is* great about me? Please, tell me,” she said, flopping down onto the couch, bouncing Yogiri slightly into the air beside her.

“Uhh...you’re reliable?”

“I guess. But I feel like reliability isn’t exactly what guys are looking for in a woman these days.”

“You know, if you’re trying to find a boyfriend for my sake, I don’t think you need to bother. Of course, if *you* want to get married, I’m happy to cheer you on.”

“Well, like, it’s not that I dislike taking care of you, Yogiri, but it feels weird for it to be a job. So if I get married and become a professional housewife, it’s more normal for me to spend my time taking care of my family. That’s what I was thinking.”

“I can’t really see you as a housewife. What about being a teacher? I think you’d be good at it. It’s not like I’ll be a kid that you have to take care of forever.”

“Ahhh. I don’t know if I want a real job. I don’t think I’d be able to fit into normal society anymore. It kind of feels like I never did.” After graduating from university, Asaka’s first job was at the Independent Higher Order Life Form Research Institute. Her role was to take care of Yogiri, something that didn’t feel like a proper job.

“Do you really have to work?” Yogiri asked. He was being provided enough of an allowance to lead a fairly luxurious life. It was more than enough for the two of them to live comfortably.

“Yeah, well, it’s not like I never thought about it...but that would kind of hurt my conscience.”

“Oh, so you *do* have a conscience.”

“Even you’re talking like that now, huh? Of course I do. I’d feel guilty bumming around with no job.”

“Well...I guess I have to think about getting a job eventually too.”

Yogiri was living as an ordinary middle school student. Though there were problems from time to time, things were working out somehow. At this rate, high school, college, and eventually employment seemed like a

realistic future, and one he was interested in pursuing.

"Do you know what kind of job you want, Yogiri?"

"Not yet. I figured I'd think about it after I find out what I'm good at."

"You should probably focus on studying while you can. Not that your grades have been anything to worry about."

Yogiri saved his game and turned off the console. "What are we doing about dinner? I think we still have leftovers from yesterday."

"I'm feeling mapo tofu. How about we go to Yuukarou?" As tired as she seemed, Asaka jumped up off the couch. Now that she had thought of dinner, it seemed her energy had returned.

"Works for me," Yogiri said, standing up and getting ready to go out. Asaka had just flopped onto the couch immediately after getting home, so she was already good to go.

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Ryouta and Ryouko had somehow managed to survive. Thanks to Ryouta's desperate pleas, the darkness relented.

"Ryouko..." Ryouta sobbed pathetically as he looked at his sister. As the darkness dropped her to the ground, she made no effort to chastise him. She must have realized they had no other choice.

"WHERE?"

Ryouta heard a whisper beside his ear. He had no time to relax. If he didn't answer the shadow's request, or if it thought he was lying, he would be killed instantly.

Ryouta began walking to the apartment building where Yogiri lived. It was an absolute failure for someone who was supposed to be a bodyguard. A true shinobi should have been willing to give his life to prevent any information from making it into enemy hands. But neither Ryouta nor Ryouko had that kind of determination. They were only children.

Ryouko didn't follow. The shadows were still wrapped around her, holding her in place, likely trying to use her as a hostage.

If he went to the apartment building, he would come across allies. The veteran, skilled shinobi of the Ninomiya family should have been able to resolve this situation, even if Ryouta couldn't. Though it felt pathetic, he couldn't think of anything he could do on his own.

Beside the apartment building, Ryouta saw his grandfather in hiding. Naturally, his grandfather noticed his approach. The old man drew a kunai. Ryouta assumed he was going to be killed and wasn't surprised in the least. He had brought an enemy directly to the place where their charge lived. Even if they weren't interested in punishing him for it, killing him would avoid the most trouble. But his grandfather was crushed where he stood. As if a huge weight had dropped on him from above, he was splattered onto the pavement.

"Ah... Ahhhhh..." Ryouta moaned wordlessly. He had wet himself, but that fact barely registered. His mother and father were there too. All he wanted to do was make sure they avoided meeting the same fate.

He saw Yogiri and Asaka leaving the apartment building. Ryouta felt a small amount of relief. If they died here, the tragedy would be over. That was all he could think about.

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Yogiri and Asaka left their apartment behind. Yuukarou was a restaurant specializing in Szechuan cuisine, with mapo tofu being one of their flagship dishes. It was a common destination for the pair.

"Hey, do you feel like someone is following us?" Asaka asked.

"Probably. I don't know for sure, though." Yogiri was always being watched. He assumed that was the case now as well, but he couldn't actually see anyone. He felt a little bad for making his watchers follow him whenever he went out, but staying home for their sake felt ridiculous. "Oh, right, I think I met one of them today." Yogiri told Asaka about his encounter on the way home from school.

"They're using kids as bodyguards?!" Asaka was appalled.

"Now that you mention it, that is pretty weird. Maybe I should ask them to stop using kids."

"Hmm... I don't know. We don't know for sure he's a bodyguard...but I guess it doesn't hurt to say it anyway. Just to let them know how we feel."

The shopping district was only a short walk away, but as they arrived, they could tell something was wrong. Everything was far too quiet. There was no one in the street. The opening of a shopping mall in the area had made the area less popular, but for it to be deserted at dinnertime was

unnerving.

“Something’s going on, isn’t it?” Asaka said.

“Probably.” Even if the streets just happened to be empty, the shops should have had people in them. They peeked into a nearby seafood shop.

“Ugh.” Yogiri winced. The smell was awful. The fish inside were rotting. There was a man who looked to be the owner lying on the floor farther in. He didn’t look dead, but he hardly looked healthy either. With his powers locked away, Yogiri couldn’t see killing intent, but he could still tell that something was wrong. He had a terrible feeling about it.

Yogiri released the seal on his powers and immediately felt a waving of killing intent wash over him. The area around them was filled with it.

“We need an ambulance!” Asaka pulled out her cell phone. “Huh?” The charm on her phone’s strap was in tatters. It was a protective amulet that she had received from the Institute, one with supernatural powers. Yogiri checked his own amulet, which was also starting to fall apart. “No good. I’ve got no reception here.”

“Let’s go home.” This wasn’t the kind of situation where they could be casually going out for dinner. When they stepped out of the store, they saw a young boy standing in the entrance to the shopping district. “Huh? Aren’t you that kid who was fighting the monkey? Are you okay?”

“Obviously he isn’t!”

As Asaka said, something was clearly off about him. His face was pale, his eyes looked empty, and his footsteps were unsteady. He was holding a sword like when Yogiri last saw him, giving him a dangerous impression.

“H...elp...” the boy managed to squeeze out. Yogiri stepped forward to try and help the boy, at which point the boy froze.

“O...OKAKU...LORD OKAKUSHI...” Something changed in the boy’s demeanor. “FOUND YOU.”

Darkness spilled out of the boy. The pitch black shadow covered everything in moments, the killing intent covering the area turning even thicker.

“Huh?” Asaka blurted out. Yogiri was speechless, equally surprised. The scenery around them had transformed. They were now standing on wooden boards, in the corridor of some house. In front of them were paper sliding doors, and behind them was nothing but darkness.

“This looks...kind of familiar. Oh, right! Is this the mansion under the

Institute?”

Like Asaka said, it looked similar to their old home underground. He felt like he could predict what he’d see if he walked left or right from here.

“I don’t know. It does look similar.” It did look familiar, but Yogiri had the feeling it wasn’t the mansion from the Institute. It could have been the tangible feeling of malice filling the air around them. Though it didn’t seem interested in killing them right away, there was clearly an unnatural presence here. The air felt sticky and was filled with a sour smell. It wasn’t the kind of place he wanted to spend much time in. “I guess we shouldn’t just stand around.”

Yogiri opened the sliding door in front of him. As expected, behind the door was a room with a straw mat floor, and sitting in the middle of it was a woman in a white kimono. She had long hair, but the way she slumped made it impossible to see her face. When Yogiri tried to get a closer look, the woman vanished.

“There was a woman there, right?” Asaka asked.

“Yeah. But she didn’t seem real. It feels like we’re in a nightmare.”

Yogiri stepped into the room, though he felt a little bad for walking in with his shoes on. Heading to the other side of the room, he opened the next door. The smell of blood washed over him. The room was drenched red, with pieces of ruined human bodies scattered across the floor. But the sight only lasted for an instant. A moment later, the room was empty. Yogiri continued, opening door after door. Each time he saw something, but he couldn’t tell what it all meant.

“What’s going on? This place feels kind of gloomy...”

“I don’t think you need to believe what we’re seeing here.”

As they progressed, Yogiri’s premonition of something bad happening grew stronger and stronger. As that ominous feeling peaked, the boy from earlier appeared in front of them. He was entirely different now. He was wearing all white, giving off a sinister aura.

“Those look like the clothes you used to wear, don’t they?” Asaka said.

Something they couldn’t see was in control of this space. The two of them could clearly sense its feelings of resentment and hatred. That concentrated malice was easily enough to kill a person. So the boy suddenly collapsed.

“What? No way, you didn’t...” Asaka looked at Yogiri, worried.

“I didn’t kill the boy,” Yogiri hurriedly answered, afraid she had misunderstood. The killing intent had been coming from whatever was possessing the child. He had only killed the source of the malice.

A moment later, they were back in the shopping district. Whether it had all been an illusion or the spirit had actually taken them somewhere, they were now back where they started.

“Hey, if anyone’s out there, can you take care of him for us?” At Yogiri’s words, a shadowy figure leaped out of hiding, grabbing the boy and taking him away. Yogiri felt he could probably leave the fallen people in the shopping district to them as well.

“Umm...let’s go home,” Asaka mumbled.

“Yeah.” He wasn’t really in the mood for eating out anymore. Turning back, they made their way home.

“That evil spirit thing...or whatever it was, it seemed to know you. Are you sure it was okay not to hear what it wanted? Was that woman maybe your mother?” Asaka asked. Apparently, she had seen the same things he had. They had likely been visions of the old mansion in the village where Lord Okakushi had been worshiped, as well as the tragedy that had occurred there. In that case, that woman may have been the previous Lord Okakushi, which would make her Yogiri’s mother.

Yogiri didn’t have strong feelings about his lack of parents, but he realized that wasn’t normal. More than anything else, he felt bad for making Asaka worry about him.

“It didn’t seem like a being we could really talk to. And I don’t care about something from so long ago anyway,” he explained.

At this point, knowing about his parents wouldn’t change anything. His only parent now was Asaka, and that was enough for him. Even if his birth parents were alive somewhere, he had no real desire to meet them.

Afterword

Volume 13. Man, that's incredible. I never thought I'd get this far when I started.

So, the story is reaching its end, but it's not quite over yet. The next volume should be the conclusion, so I hope to see you there.

Also, we've now reached one million copies sold across the whole series! That's all thanks to readers like you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you! There's no point in worrying about small milestones now, so the next target is two million! Or at least, that's what I'd like to say. I'd *like* to, but since we're getting to the end of the series, I don't feel that's especially realistic. But dreams should be big, right?!

I should write a little bit more, so let me talk about a game I've been playing recently. It's called *Dysmantle*. It's a game set during a zombie apocalypse, where you survived alone in an emergency shelter, and now you have to keep surviving.

One of the interesting points of the game is that the majority of objects you come across can be destroyed. Trees, appliances, walls, cars, all fair game. You might ask what makes that interesting, but I feel like the people who enjoy games like *Minecraft* where they can take everything apart themselves will really like it.

Now, for my thanks.

To my supervising editor. A lot happened that ended up with the release date being changed, so thank you for dealing with all of it.

For the illustrator, Chisato Naruse. My instructions this time were pretty rough, so I'm sure it was tough work for you. I am eternally grateful for the fantastic illustrations you've made. Thank you so much!

The next volume will likely be the last, so I hope to see you there!

□□□□
Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Hello, this is the illustrator, Chisato Naruse.

I feel like this is the third time I've brought this up, but once again, another character has returned that I designed early and never expected to see again...
At some point, I grew quite attached to Atila.

I enjoyed working on the illustrations for this volume too!
I hope we meet again in the next volume.

CHISATO NARUSE

My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered,
No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!
Illustration: Chisato Naruse

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
Illustrator: Chisato Naruse
My Instant Death Ability is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!
13

Bonus Short Story

Tomochika: Okay, hello! This is Tomochika Dannoura. Welcome to Question Corner 8! You might be asking, “Wait, you’re still doing this?!” But the series isn’t quite over yet, so here we are! As a scheme to cut corners that ended up being just as much work as anything else, it kind of failed in its mission, but it’s too late to change it now!
Mokomoko: *We have some leftover questions from the previous volume that we will be covering this time. If the main story continues on, we will need to collect more questions; however, that is a surprisingly troublesome task. We cannot answer any questions that would result in spoilers, so most questions appearing here are pretty inane.*
Tomochika: Why don’t we just do a short story like everyone else does, then?
Mokomoko: *It is far too late for that now.*
Tomochika: Anyway, let’s save worrying about that for next time!
Mokomoko: *As a reminder, this is a bizarre pseudospace outside the timeline of the main story. Do not press it so hard for details!*
Tomochika: All right, then; let’s get to the first question!

Q: The village Yogiri came from was somewhere deep in the mountains where no one knew about it, but wouldn’t it appear on aerial photographs like Google Maps?

Sana

Tomochika: How would I know?!
Mokomoko: *That answer feels like cheating. You could use it for anything...*
Tomochika: Oh, sorry, it’s kind of a reflex. I guess it’s kind of rude to the questioner. I apologize.
Mokomoko: *Do not concern yourself with it, as rude as it is. To the point of the question, though, the settlement was under the management of the*

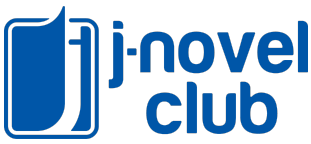
Japanese government. Surely they would have some way of obfuscating it.
Tomochika: Can they do stuff like that?
Mokomoko: *They can intentionally lower the quality of images or even black out sections covering military installations, so it is certainly possible if they try.*
Tomochika: I wonder what it looks like, then.
Yogiri: Why don't we check?
Tomochika: Oh, we can?
Yogiri: I don't remember exactly where it was, though. Here, maybe?
Tomochika: Let's see... There's a village there, I guess. It doesn't look especially hidden.
Yogiri: Is there a point in hiding it? From above, it just looks like an ordinary village in the mountains.
Mokomoko: *However, it is strange to have a village in the middle of the mountains with no roads connecting to it. I imagine some television show would attempt to investigate it.*
Tomochika: Yeah, I could see some YouTuber going there...
Yogiri: Hmm... If you tried to just walk in, you'd be stopped at the entrance. And didn't anyone who snuck into the village end up disappearing?
Tomochika: Well, that's a little unnerving!

Q: I know Yogiri likes *Monster H*nter*, but is he okay missing all the new ones that came out while he's been in another world?

Subspace Tackle

Yogiri: Of course not.
Tomochika: I guess during the story, he's been playing *MHX*...so counting the DLC for that, he's missed five titles by now!
Yogiri: Why do you sound so happy about it?
Tomochika: I don't see you upset very often, so I guess I got a bit carried away.
Yogiri: Anyway, I haven't even gotten close to finishing the one I have, so I guess it's not a huge problem.
Tomochika: Speaking of which, how far do you play before considering the game finished? I tend to quit whenever I get bored.

Yogiri: It’s over once you’ve cleared all the quests, right?
Tomochika: That’s... Uh, with the randomness in endgame content, that sounds pretty complicated...
Yogiri: Well, I haven’t made it that far, so...
Mokomoko: *Not too much time has passed within the story itself, so by the time you make it back to our world, the next title may have yet to be released anyway!*
Tomochika: All right, then! That’s all for this time! We’ll probably have another Question Corner next time, so if you have questions, feel free to send them in!



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My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me! Volume 13
by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Nathan Macklem
Edited by Tess Nanavati

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